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# **VEDANTIC HINDUISM IN COLONIAL BENGAL**

**REFORMED HINDUISM AND  
WESTERN PROTESTANTISM**

Victor A. van Bijlert



# Vedantic Hinduism in Colonial Bengal

This book explores the ways in which modern Hindu identities were constructed in the early nineteenth century. It draws parallels between sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Protestantism and the rise of modernity in the West, and the Hindu reformation in the nineteenth century which contributed to the rise of Vedantic Hindu modernity discourse in India.

The nineteenth-century Hindu modernity, it is argued, sought both individual flourishing and collective emancipation from Western domination. For the first time Hinduism began to be constructed as a religion of sacred texts. In particular, texts belonging to what could be loosely called Vedanta: Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. In this way, the main protagonists of this Vedantist modernity were imitating Western Protestantism, but at the same time also inventing totally novel interpretations of what it meant to be Hindu. The book traces the major ideological paths taken in this cultural-religious reformation from its originator Rammohun Roy up to its last major influence, Rabindranath Tagore.

Bringing these two versions of modernity into conversation brings a unique view on the formation of modern Hindu identities. It will, therefore, be of great interest to scholars of religious, Hindu and South Asian studies, as well as religious history and interreligious dialogue.

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# Preface

The present work is the tentative result of a long-standing thought experiment. This experiment proceeds along the following assumptions and hypotheses: modernity is primarily a state of mind conducive to individual self-realisation and autonomy. For this to have tangible effects on the surrounding physical and social world, this mentality needs to be internalised by large groups of people. The process of internalisation requires the production and dissemination of discourse (ideology, ideas, vistas, broad mental horizons). Historically such discourse, in order to appeal to the inner consciousness of its recipients, assumed forms that could be called religious; in other words, this type of discourse addressed questions of ultimate concern about life and death, but from the perspective of the actual daily life of ordinary people. The modernity discourse was intended to change the thinking and acting of ordinary people in their social setting. And in this way the mentality of modernity would effect irreversible social and political changes. The producers of this type of discourse hoped to change people by exposing them to a constant stream of mostly written texts meant to be read and internalised. In this way people would be enabled to form their own opinions. This, in sum, seems to describe what happened in Europe from the sixteenth century onwards. The physical elements of the invention of the printing press, the constant production of literature and the growth of a habit of reading, provided the material basis of what is known as the Protestant Reformation, the pan-European movement that provided the religious inspiration to this production of the printed word. Western modernity, in short, seems to be the outcome of the Reformation that began in the sixteenth century as a protest against, and innovation of, the existing Roman Catholic Church that had culturally dominated Europe for more than a millennium. The Reformation caused people to become more individually self-aware, to act independently of tradition, to strive for individual self-development and ultimately to reorganise society and politics in irreversible ways away from the past into an unknown future. The Reformation led to collective emancipation from traditional political and religious power-structures. But this is not the end of the present thought experiment, because these things are known (if highly contested).

The real thought experiment in this work centres around the question: if this mechanism of individual self-realisation and collective emancipation 'worked' in Europe and was spawned as it were by Christian Protestantism, can one imagine something comparable to what happened in India on the basis of a totally different religion like Hinduism, and if so, how did this take place? Thus the emphasis in this work is on the sort-of-reformation of Hinduism that took place in the nineteenth century in colonial Bengal. The situation in Bengal was somewhat similar to Europe in the sixteenth century. The Indian printing presses that were just introduced produced works written both in English and in vernacular languages as well as Sanskrit. The printing press in India produced the necessary momentum to cater to a growing readership and thus a growing demand for reading materials. The growing supply also stimulated the demand for education. Indian readers began to read about basic texts of Hinduism and this caused something akin to the dissemination of the Bible translations in European languages during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. The present work does not go into wider details of economy, and the social stratifications of colonial Bengal and the rest of India. What it does is highlight the production of the ideology or ideologies of modernity that were intended to change the minds of the readers. It devotes attention to those writers cum activists that exerted the greatest charismatic influence over their readership and the Indian public at large. The main burden of this thought experiment is whether modernity emerging from a religious reformation could also work outside its originally Christian habitat in Europe; thus, can one posit something akin to the European Reformation also for Hinduism in nineteenth century Bengal and what were its creators and what was its written discourse like and how did it influence its audiences?

Such line of questioning also entails some general discussion of the main terms that are being used like modernity itself, Protestantisation, scripture, Hinduism, individual and collective emancipation. This work will be found to be full of discussions of individual thinkers and their influence. Also their writings are being discussed but only to the extent that they discussed these grand issues themselves. A careful reader will probably miss much or feel disappointed at the lack of deeper theoretical discussion. Some may even regard the whole exercise as futile or outdated. However, I have always suspected that the well-known authors whose writings and actions I discuss in this book are multifaceted enough to invite the kind of analysis they have received in this work. The intentions and meanings of great authors and thinkers are not exhausted by a few interpretations only.

What I hope to accomplish with this work is a deeper appreciation of the Vedantic reformation, the Hindu Protestantism, that these authors have contributed to, and indeed almost created from scratch. I am quite convinced of the ultimate value in life of the idea of modernity as a personal quest for social emancipation from traditional constraints, and full self-actualisation, and I am also convinced of the beauty and brilliance of the



Vedantic reform discourse that has shown (to me at least) that modernity is emphatically not something exclusively Western (even though it may have started in the West). I was always struck by the eminently modern character of even the ancient source-texts of the Vedanta, the Upanishads. Apparently, nineteenth-century Bengali Hindu humanists also thought so and tried their best to bring out this modern character of Vedantic scriptures that belong to the more ancient layers of Sanskrit sacred literature. One could perhaps call the authors I have discussed in this work modern Hindu theologians and ideologues, or Hindu theologians and promulgators of modernity.

A work like this is not the result of my own exertions alone. Countless institutions and their staffs as well as friends both in Europe and India have helped me in numerous ways. As there are so many, it is not possible to thank them all in great detail. A few institutions and their staffs I will mention: the Leiden University Library; the library of the Kern Institute in Leiden; the National Library of Calcutta (Kolkata); the Ramakrishna Mission Institute of Culture; Calcutta University; Visva Bharati University, Santiniketan; Nordic Institute of Asian Studies, Copenhagen; Indian Institute of Management, Calcutta; Asian Studies department of the University of Amsterdam; the Faculty of Religion and Theology, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam; and lastly my wife, Dr. Bhaswati Bhattacharya, who is also my informant and teacher; and the warm nest that is the ancestral house in Kharagpur where her family lives.

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## Modernity as state of mind

Modernity as a global normative mentality is characterised by respect for the autonomy of the individual person, the physical inviolability of the person's body, and freedom for the individual to develop his or her talents and be able to flourish. All these can also be demanded for groups of individuals, for peoples, and for nations. Thus modernity has an individual and a collective aspect. But the flourishing of the collective is predicated upon the freedom and autonomy of the individual. This presupposes the collective acceptance of the liberty and equality of the individuals that make up the collectivity. Ideally a modern emancipated collectivity (be it region or state) consists of emancipated self-conscious and autonomous individual members of the collectivity and these members have put in place systems of decision-making in which everyone has an equal say. This normative mentality of modernity we may regard as strong moral beliefs held by many. Thus modernity is not primarily about tremendous technological advancements, new architecture, the instalment of rapid forms of transport or the mass production of consumption goods, not even about institutions like the nation-state or general elections. Modernity is primarily a mentality that informs the creation of these visible phenomena. It starts in the human mind, in the mind that is fundamentally changed and opened up to new unprecedented forms of thinking, to imagining novel possibilities of living. Modernity is the moral belief in the equal worth of all human beings, the belief that all human beings must be treated with the same respect and that they all have the right to fully flourish in freedom.

To many such ideas may seem self-evident truths, but they are by no means held universally and they certainly were not held at all times. That they are widespread is the result of historical processes. Nowadays, these ideas and moral beliefs would be considered to be secular in nature. They are deemed progressive and therefore are probably unrelated to religious traditions, for the latter are often seen as conservative and even oppressive. Secular moral beliefs and practices like treating everyone equally may not be what conservative religions and politics would endorse. Hence, searching for the lineage

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of modernity, one would not in the first place think of religious notions and traditions. And yet this seems precisely the domain where the mentality of modernity originated. Larry Siedentop (2015) has argued this case for what we may term Western modernity. Siedentop traces more in particular how the individual ‘became the organizing social role in the West’, the emergence of civil society and ‘the characteristic distinction between public and private spheres and its emphasis on the role of conscience and choice’ (op. cit.: 2). These were not rediscovered, Siedentop argues, by the Enlightenment in a somewhat spurious return to Greek and Roman antiquity; rather, they were the outcome of more than one-and-a-half millennia of Christianity.

Starting with the preaching of the apostle Paul, Christianity was a message of universal hope, a spiritual liberation from the idea of slavery which was deeply ingrained in the mindset of Greek and Roman antiquity. Individualism and secularism were not the hallmark of antiquity, but the hierarchical ordering of the family, and inequality in gender, in age and in social position. All these were questioned and ideologically undermined by early Christianity. Not Greek and Roman philosophy but the death and resurrection of the person of Jesus, according to Siedentop, offered a new picture of reality, providing ‘an ontological foundation for “the individual”, through the promise that humans have access to the deepest reality as individuals rather than merely as members of a group’ (op. cit.: 63). In other words: the worth of the individual and the equality of all humans were the underlying principles of early Christian preaching and tradition, thus these were literally gospel, ‘the good message’ (*euangelion* in Greek). In sum, for Paul ‘belief in the Christ makes possible the emergence of a primary role shared equally by all (“the equality of souls”)’ (op. cit.: 62). Paul, Siedentop asserts, ‘overturns the assumption of natural inequality by creating an inner link between the divine will and human agency’; these two can be fused within each individual, ‘thereby justifying the assumption of moral equality of humans’ (op. cit.: 61).

It took centuries for these thoughts to be thoroughly internalised and become widely accepted. In the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries ‘individual devotion’ through ‘real knowledge of the scriptures’ was combined with ‘deep-seated anti-clericalism’ (op. cit.: 331). Thus was born the amalgam of Christian reform movements better known as the Reformation. Siedentop deplores that the post-Reformation period, especially the Enlightenment, has obscured in the popular mind the fact that ‘liberal thought is the offspring of Christianity’ (op. cit.: 332). The Reformation laid great stress on the inner aspect of religion, on uncoerced belief, the private sphere of conscience. Individual conscience, personal intentions and the moral life of the individual led to self-reliance and the habit of forming associations. Egalitarian moral intuitions, thus Siedentop, were turned against the authoritarianism of the old church, thus ‘Paul’s notion of “Christian liberty” had returned with a vengeance’ (op. cit.: 338–9). Siedentop points to another remarkable aspect of this liberty and individualism: German and Dutch pietists as well

as the followers of Wycliffe in England all harked back to Meister Eckhart, the late medieval German mystic who emphasised the mystical union of the individual soul with God. In this view religion was once again not about ritual and conformity but personal belief and moral convictions. The 'inner-ness' is what matters here (cf. *op. cit.*: 340). This mystical union and inner-ness bring us already close to certain individualistic aspects of Hinduism but more about these later.

Those with postmodern leanings could easily regard the foregoing as Eurocentric. For it seems to suggest that values of modernity such as individual autonomy, and individual and collective emancipation from oppressive forms of tradition or alien rule are of Western (i.e. European) origin and did not emerge in any other culture but the Western Christian one. On the other hand, Western Christianity was often the handmaid of various forms of oppression from the medieval crusades to the Western colonial expansion from the fifteenth century onwards until quite recently. Thus, to suggest that Western Christianity and no one else produced emancipatory values is uninformed and hypocritical to say the least; it may even reveal a spirit of white colonial feeling of superiority. The criticism is valid. As the Indian social theorist Partha Chatterjee once remarked in connection with Benedict Anderson's thesis on the imagined community that is the modern nation-state:

History, it would seem, has decreed that we in the postcolonial world shall only be perpetual consumers of modernity. Europe and the Americas, the only true subjects of history, have thought out on our behalf not only the script of colonial enlightenment and exploitation, but also that of our anticolonial resistance. . . . Even our imaginations must remain forever colonized.

(Chatterjee 1993a: 5)

This criticism was levelled against historical interpretations of anti-colonial nationalism, thus it addresses Western ideas of historiography, but it could be levelled against any theoretical interpretation of non-Western modernity (granted such a phenomenon exists).

Within the context of Siedentop's thesis about the origins of Western liberalism, we could critique this thesis by pointing out that the values of modernity which Siedentop extracts from Christianity can be extracted from other religions as well. In other words, the idea that modernity is of Western origin should be falsified, and it can be falsified. Indian Hinduism of the early nineteenth century offers interesting examples of this. The outcome of this Hinduism is not the perpetuation of some regional pure tradition unsullied by Western influences but an interesting case of Hindu self-realisation that has led to modernity in a mode different from the Western one in details but similar in overall effect. What the Indian Hindu case also shows is the religious origin of this modernity, in much the same way as Siedentop has

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traced the origins of Western modernity in Christianity. In order to trace the genealogy of part of Indian modernity, one has to look at the particulars of the Hindu reform movement that started in the early nineteenth century. It reveals a condensed and shortened trajectory that is comparable to the Western trajectory to modernity via the Reformation in the sixteenth century and the Enlightenment in the late seventeenth and the eighteenth centuries. What took Western Europe almost three centuries was accomplished in India in less than a century. Or to put it differently: Europe needed four centuries to modernise itself, India did this in less than a century with about the same results. Europe ended up with independent nation-states, many of them constitutional republics by the end of World War One; India ended up a secular republic after World War Two.

#### **Modernity in the Indian Subcontinent**

India became an independent nation-state after an increasingly radical anti-colonial struggle that lasted from the beginning of 1900 till Independence in 1947. Based on religion India had split up in two states in 1947: secular India and Muslim majority Pakistan. The anti-colonial struggle had ended in the bloodbath of the infamous Partition during the months leading up to Independence in the middle of August 1947. Religions had allegedly caused this dramatic splitting up. The majority of Hindus were now living in the secular Republic of India, while a large section of Indian Muslims now found themselves in two wings of Pakistan: the West-wing west of India and bordering Afghanistan and Iran, while the East wing was the large Bengali enclave surrounded by India in the East. Pakistan itself was once more partitioned in 1971 with the creation of independent Bangladesh out of the East wing and the state of Pakistan was now limited to the West wing.<sup>1</sup> All these struggles for independence in South Asia have both a cultural and a religious component. The nationalisms that inspired these struggles had many contributing factors such as language, economy, politics, but especially the first Partition in 1947 was largely due to religious identity-politics. In any case, political movements made use of religious identities as rallying points and thus marked out who belonged to the in-groups and who didn't. Religion, specifically Hinduism as the religion of the British-Indian majority as against Islam which was the religion of the largest minority, was made into a major factor in the Partition. In Indian politics it remained a lasting cause of political friction and polarisation to this day. The polarisation, these days, is not only between Hindus in India and Muslims that remained in India, but also and perhaps even more so between Indians that strongly adhere to the principles of secularism embedded in the Indian Constitution and those who regard themselves as Hindu nationalists, some of whom would like to turn India into a Hindu state. Then there is the matter of caste and the social disadvantages it causes to the Indian underclasses. Caste is a religious category with a socio-economic component. From all this it should

be obvious that religion is an important social and political issue with a long history, going back centuries. Nationalism, however, is not so old, and yet the influence of Hinduism on Indian nationalism is significant.

Indian nationalism was born in the early nineteenth century as a result of British paramountcy in the Subcontinent. Its first breeding ground seems to have been among Bengali upper-caste Hindus, more in particular the Brahmin pandits whose expertise in Sanskrit learning was sought by the officials of the East India Company. The latter effectively acted as the government of Bengal from the late eighteenth century until 1858. In his analysis of the emergence of Hindu nationalism, Zavos makes the case that the modern concept of Hinduism as a world-religion was largely formed by the colonial state: 'The conception of Hinduism as a religion was an area in which the power of the emerging state was undoubtedly influential'. Furthermore, during 'the nineteenth century . . . movements towards the articulation of Hinduism as a single religious tradition, to be compared with other "World Religions", are clearly evident' (Zavos 2002: 25). The idea that this Hinduism needed to be based on original textual sources, in effect on Sanskrit dharma literature preferably as ancient as possible, Zavos attributes to the perceived need for such texts in the Company's courts of law. The British judges wished to possess authoritative versions of the source-texts the Brahmin pandits allegedly referred to in their formal legal opinions (*vyavastha*). British judges regarded the ancient texts as classical and pristine, whereas contemporary Hinduism was perceived by them as degenerate (cf. op. cit.: 30–2). Most of Zavos's monograph deals with the later development of Hindu organisations and their propagation of Hindu nationalism as a set of intimately connected ideologies. Zavos's focus is actually on what in India from 1920s onwards was called *sangathan*, 'organisation, formation', which Zavos calls 'a central feature of Hindu nationalist ideology' (op. cit.: 16). Organisation is not characteristic of traditional forms of Hindu religiosity but distinctly modern. The forming of organisations was mostly linked with the Hindu reform movements and owed to Christian influence (cf. op. cit.: 16). Hindu reform movements, also the so-called orthodox ones, emulated some form of church organisation. This meant that people could voluntarily opt for membership and attend meetings and religious gatherings like in a Christian church community.

## Hinduism as a religion

Both Hinduism and religion need to be discussed in the context of the nineteenth century introduction of these terms in India and in European scholarly writing about India, and regarding the modern use of Hinduism as a term for one of the great world-religions. Let us start with religion, a term that can hardly be avoided in Western scholarly parlance, for instance when one speaks from the perspective of anthropology, sociology, philosophy or religious studies. 'Religion' has led and still leads to much heated debate, especially in the context of South Asian religions.

A good representative summary of the most recent discussions on Indian religion is found in Bloch et al. (2010). Some scholars represented in this volume hold that 'religion' is a 'category of the imagination' and a product of Eurocentrism and the 'cultural imperialism of Christianity' (cf. Bloch et al. 2010: 97–9). This Christian influence is emphasised for instance by Richard King who draws on the work of the often cited historian of religions Jonathan Z. Smith. King also holds that the concept of religion is predominantly Anglo-Protestant in origin (cf. op. cit.: 105–6). Timothy Fitzgerald on the other hand argues that the word 'religion' is a misleading 'reification' (op. cit.: 115) and that contemporary 'usages misleadingly suggest that "religions" are observable things in the world, which is a form of misplaced concreteness' for, according to Fitzgerald, 'religion is an act of the imagination which we are persuaded to believe in by the rhetoric of academics, politicians, media people, and by general discourse' (op. cit.: 115). John Zavos agrees, claiming that religion as 'a network of phenomena' is implicated in the 'epistemic violence of post-Enlightenment thinking exported to the rest of the world through European expansion' (op. cit.: 56). For Buddhism Zavos makes a remarkable exception, for according to him Buddhism is 'virulently anti-essentialist' (ibid.) and thus quite in line with postmodern thinking.

S. N. Balagangadhara holds that Hinduism and Buddhism 'exist . . . but they do so only in the Western universities' (op. cit.: 138–9). Religion for Balagangadhara is a typically 'Semitic' affair which he defines as 'explanatory intelligible account of both the cosmos and itself' (op. cit.: 144). Balagangadhara miniaturises his elaborate argument which he presented in Balagangadhara (1994). In this large and extremely erudite book he argues that 'religion' is not a universal category found in every culture on earth, but derives from (mainly) Protestant Christian theology (as far as modern times are concerned). Due to the successful secularisation and globalisation of Protestantism, this concept of 'religion' gained global currency. In reality, however, neither Hinduism nor Buddhism is a religion, nor do they exist under these designations (except in the books of Western scholars). In other words, 'Hinduism' and 'Buddhism' are constructions made by Western Indologists and anthropologists for the convenience of colonial civil servants (for instance those that were responsible for taking the first censuses in British India in the late nineteenth century).

Jacob de Roover and Sarah Claerhout, both following Balagangadhara, summarise their own position on Hinduism and Buddhism as follows: both are Western constructs that are mistaken for empirical realities, 'not only by Western scholars and laymen, but also by the Western-educated classes of India and elsewhere' (op. cit.: 170). Perhaps the only dissenting view on religion is put forward by David Lorenzen to the effect that religion is 'any set of normative ideas about how society should behave' and 'so long as the source of authority for these normative ideas is considered to be supernatural or at least beyond reason' (op. cit.: 36).

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to analyse these observations (to some extent inspired by postcolonial theory) in great detail. They do seem to fairly represent views that are nowadays quite commonly held. For instance Dalmia and von Stietencron (1995) has a chapter arguing that nineteenth-century Vaishnavism was constructed as a real religion within Hinduism (Dalmia and von Stietencron 1995: 179 ff). In the same volume Partha Chatterjee argues that ‘historical claims of political Hinduism are . . . a product of the contestations with the forms of colonial knowledge’ (op. cit.: 103–4). The contributors to Dalmia and von Stietencron (1995) and Bloch et al. (2010) often couldn’t be further apart ideologically but a few commonalities among their approaches can be detected.<sup>2</sup> The first is the fact that most of them owe some form of allegiance to postcolonial and postmodern social theory or are using arguments derived from such theory.<sup>3</sup> In spite of the critical merits of postcolonial and postmodern scholarship, these views seem to labour under the notion that rationality is Western and constitutes a form of ‘epistemic violence’. Rationality or common sense, however, can be historically proven not to be a mere Western accident. Rational philosophy did exist in ancient India – not only in ancient Greece – but it did not play the same socio-political role that seventeenth-century European rationalism played. The earliest examples of ancient Indian rationalism can be found in the epistemological sections of the ayurvedic text, the *Caraka Saṃhitā*, and in the *Nyāya Sūtra*, both dating from around the beginning of the common era.

Another postmodern notion is that in social theory the examination of generalities is inadmissible, because postmodern understanding of reality stipulates that there exist only particulars. Even if from a point of view of epistemology (both Indian and Western) one could argue for the existence of particulars only, one is still left with an explanation for the common-sense notion of generalities. General traits of a religion like Hinduism cannot simply be dismissed as Western impositions on a chaotic Indian reality. They need to be explained. But it may be true that what really keeps Hinduism together is not what most academics think accounts for the unity of Hinduism. The absence of a generally convincing characterisation of Hinduism and the absence of an explanation as to why Indians are able to recognise certain patterns of behaviour as Hinduism but are not able to clearly point out why this is so, gave postmodern theoreticians the idea that Hinduism is a totally Western invention. This accounts for the postmodern idea that Hinduism and Buddhism are mere Western academic constructs that do not correspond to real cultural phenomena. Even if all Indians or some Indians believe that they are Hindus or Buddhists, then the postmodern or rather postcolonial conclusion is that these Indians must have been duped and misled by Western scholarship. This may be due to Western education in India, education whose language of instruction is after all English. And thus Western notions are smuggled into Indian Westernised thinking. The only elaborate argument to this effect is again offered by Balagangadhara (1994).



Writing as an insider of 'Hinduism', Balagangadhara shows with genuine wide-ranging erudition that Hinduism as religion amounts to a Western projection of Christianity onto Indian cultural realities. In other words, Hinduism as a religion is what Western travellers, civil servants, missionaries and anthropologists and Indologists imagined they saw in India because they were conditioned by a centuries-old Western Christian cultural tradition that taught them to see religions in everything that was outside their cultural boundaries (cf. Balagangadhara 1994: 110–87). Gita Dharampal-Frick is making a similar claim about the Western perception of Indian social arrangements which Europeans termed 'caste'. She suggests the term and what it stands for is largely based on European, if not Eurocentric notions of the 'otherness' of the Indians vis-à-vis European Christian notions (cf. Dalmia and von Stietencron 1995: 82 ff).

If Hinduism needs to be interpreted in terms of Christianity, there are certain traits to look for in order to recognise such Hinduism. The origins of Hinduism as a recent term and a recent phenomenon lie squarely in the colonial encounter. 'Hinduism is the product of a complex colonial encounter between elite Hindu groups and western administrative, orientalist, and missionary influences', thus Richard King (Bloch et al. 2010: 103). Moreover, King maintains that the dominant Anglo-Protestant conception of religion is based on the following assumptions: (1) religion is a distinct domain; (2) higher religions are based on creeds; (3) religions are grounded in a closed canon; (4) religions should be pure essences; (5) reform means return to pristine purity; (6) religion should unify under a common rubric and thus be exclusivist, or religion assumes that all other religions are actually saying the same thing and can be included under a common rubric on this ground (cf. op. cit.: 105–6). King sees modern Hinduism clearly as a reflection of these Protestant claims. Fitzgerald in the same volume argues that 'Hinduism' is a 'fundamentally problematic' category (op. cit.: 125). The link between Protestantism and colonialism is also upheld by Robert Yelle who refers to Balagangadhara (1994) as presenting the most cogent argument for the Christian impact of colonial representations of Hinduism (Yelle 2013: 5). Yelle posits that colonial 'projects for the codification of Hindu tradition . . . were influenced by a Protestant privileging of the text' (op. cit.: 9). He adds: 'Colonialism, like capitalism . . . frequently transformed concepts inherited from Christian soteriology and modelled itself on that religion's self-presentation as a mode of universalism' (op. cit.: 11). Yelle specifies the Christianity in Balagangadhara as Protestantism. The picture that emerges from King's and Yelle's observations reveals the impact of Protestantism on the creation of modern Hinduism. This may not be far from the historical truth. But in the sequel we will look closer at this causal nexus and qualify not only this nexus but also the term Hinduism and its characteristic as a religion.

Even if we could agree with De Roover and Claerhout that religion is a Christian academic construct (cf. Bloch et al. 2010: 165, 167) and that both Indians and Europeans did not correctly understand their respective terms

like *dharma*, *shastra* and 'religion' and 'scripture' (cf. op. cit.: 174–6), there seems no point in endlessly debating the exact nature of a misunderstanding or the precise definitions that would be necessary for each other to 'make sense' of both sets of traditions. The term religion seems to work alright to designate some sphere which is not exactly the everyday worldly business, and use 'Hinduism' to denote whatever Hindus in India thought they could understand by that term, including their self-understanding. Both 'religion' and 'Hinduism' seem to work alright as shorthand for what would otherwise require very cumbersome descriptions. Nevertheless, there is very definitely the danger that the terms religion as well as Hinduism may be understood to mean something that they aren't. Richard King's six assumptions about Anglo-Protestantism as religion show indeed the possible misunderstandings that have occurred and will occur when one speaks about Hinduism as a religion in such terms. For it is found in real-life experience that Hinduism doesn't move in a domain very distinct from everyday social life, is not credal, doesn't have a single closed canon, may not be a pure essence and doesn't possess any pristine purity to which it could return. These characteristics do not define Hinduism but do show that Hinduism is not like Christianity and perhaps not comparable to Christianity. And yet the early nineteenth century witnessed the modernisation of Hinduism with a strong influence from Protestantism, or so it seems. What did this nineteenth-century Hindu reform entail and how did it inform a Hindu mode of modernity?

### **Protestantisation of Hinduism**

Terms like 'religion', 'scripture', 'Hinduism', even 'Protestantisation' are useful terminological tools to denote certain phenomena which we know exist somehow, even if not in an exact definable way. We could probably use these terms while constantly keeping in mind that in connection with Indian religious traditions summarised under the heading 'Hinduism', they designate phenomena which look like religion, or like a scripture, or like Protestantism. These terms act mostly metaphorically, not literally. They are not exact but seem to work and convey some meaning. Of course, it would be unscientific dogmatism to claim these terms denote precisely definable facts with an exactly matching counterpart in Christianity (or Islam for that matter). Protestantisation in relation to Hinduism does not designate exactly the same historical given as the rise of Protestantism in Western Europe in the early sixteenth century. Protestantism in Hinduism refers to something akin to the Western Christian Reformation in some important ways and seems to have led to somewhat similar outcomes as Protestantism has led to in Europe. But there are differences as well, and these must not be ignored or overlooked.

Western Protestantism is characterised by theological and ideological differences with the tradition against which it rose; it also had ritual differences

with the preceding tradition, and it organised itself in a way that was the opposite of the traditional Roman Catholic Church that it sought to reform. Theologically, Protestantism meant a break with the doctrines of the Roman Catholic Church on the sources of its religious authority. With Protestantism, the ultimate and sole authority rested not with human institutions and age-old Catholic tradition but with the Bible alone. The Bible, the Scripture, was to become the source of detailed knowledge about God's will and intentions with the world; the institutions of a church or its hierarchies were no longer regarded as valid sources of divine knowledge. The Bible itself contained everything one needed to know for salvation. Protestantism promoted the study and dissemination of the Bible in vernacular translations, thus opening up the knowledge of the Bible to the largest possible community of readers and hearers. In principle everyone was invited to study the Bible for collective and private edification and instruction. Organisationally Protestantism did away with church hierarchy and the top-down chains of authority in the traditional Roman Catholic Church. Every lay person reading the Bible for himself or herself also implied that everyone in principle should be able to explain the Bible. This and the bottom-up organisation of local congregations gave an extra boost to Christian individualism and personal liberty, which were, moreover, stressed in Protestantism on the basis of the sanctity of private conscience as the first source of knowing to distinguish between good and evil. Obedience to the Roman Catholic Church and to worldly rulers was replaced by obedience to conscience and the Bible first (but this did imply obedience to worldly rulers too, as long as they weren't tyrants trying to impose their will on the conscience of the believer). Thus Protestantism not only sought to reform the old Church but also heralded political revolts against Empire. In the sphere of ritual – that is, the way a church service was to be conducted – Protestantism replaced the intricacies of the Latin holy Mass with the simpler form of worship in the vernaculars. These consisted of prayer, singing of rhymed versions of the Psalms, readings from the Bible and a sermon. Although the Protestantisation of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe was not an easy process, one element greatly advanced its course: the already existing infrastructure of parish churches in towns and villages. At the early phases of Protestantism these could simply be taken over and used for the Protestant form of Christianity. Another fact that made the dissemination of the Reformation relatively easy was the existence of the printing press. This enabled the Protestants to spread their message by way of leaflets, pamphlets and books. All these facts are known but it is useful to remind ourselves of them in order to make a comparison with what could be termed the Protestantisation of Hinduism.

In Hinduism there is no counterpart of the Roman Catholic Church with an ecclesiastical hierarchy and a centralised network of churches. Hinduism is difficult to define, but to anyone who has lived with Hindus for some time it is clear that ritual, conformity to certain patterns of ritual behaviour, adherence to rules of maintaining ritual purity, taboos on what to touch

with what part of the body, vegetarianism or no vegetarianism, showing respect to images of Hindu Gods are all components of everyday Hindu life. Being Hindu is mostly about adhering to local customs, local rituals, local deities, local holy places, local temples. All these are recognisable as belonging to Hinduism in a very vague way but the local details and numerous variations give the impression that there is no unity in Hinduism. Some things may be quite similar everywhere, like caste, gotra, varna and the Brahmin pandit. Still Hinduism looks like fragmented local and regional forms of orthopraxis and 'ortho-conformity'. There is no thing like 'orthodoxy' because the latter indicates right doctrine and right belief, but lived day-to-day Hinduism is not characterised by explicit beliefs or creeds but by conformity (often without knowing and without asking questions) to ritual practices. Most Hindus do not and need not cognitively 'know' about doctrines or Hindu 'scriptures'. There are some narratives that bind Hindus together, like the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana. However, their stories are widely known but not directly through widespread knowledge of their Sanskrit 'originals'. Rather, the narratives are known often only orally in vernacular versions that are not exact translations of the Sanskrit versions. This shows that Hinduism has defining narratives like these two epics, but no fixed scriptures to which one could always return and that are universal. Basically Hinduism is what local communities and families think it is and what they have always practised by way of family rituals, public festivals and pilgrimages. But there is no fixed set of pan-Hindu doctrines or a pan-Hindu creed. Taking all these facts into consideration, Hinduism doesn't resemble the Christianity of, for instance, the Roman Catholic Church. If this is granted, then what is Hindu Protestantism and how can we meaningfully use this term?

The earlier sketch of everyday Hinduism is based on observation in the present. The early nineteenth century differed from this picture, notably in respect of an extraordinary phenomenon: the burning alive of a high-caste Hindu widow on the pyre of her deceased husband. This widow-burning was to some extent a local custom, especially in Bengal. The custom allegedly gave great social and religious prestige to a family in which this happened. Moreover it was a public spectacle with great dramatic impact on Hindu society as a whole. Widow-burning was a Hindu practice that elicited criticism and condemnation abroad. Yet everyday ritual Hinduism was not constantly shaken by such events. The level of knowledge of Hindu doctrine among the average followers of Hinduism in those days would probably have been even less than nowadays.<sup>4</sup> Then what would Hindu Protestantism be in this context?

We can trace the origin of Hindu 'Protestantism' to the Bengali Brahmin thinker Rammohun Roy (1772–1833) who set the tone for what was to become Hindu Protestantism.<sup>5</sup> The widow-burning in his own family was probably the dramatic event that made him vow to reform Hinduism, even though he had been questioning many practices of the Hinduism he knew

from his Brahmin family and community from an early age.<sup>6</sup> In Chapter 3 we will discuss Rammohun's thinking in greater detail. For the moment it suffices to give a general outline of his concept of Hindu reform. It is perhaps more accurate to call Rammohun's intervention a form of Hindu innovation, rather than reform. This is for several reasons. First, he limited his Hinduism to Vedanta spirituality.<sup>7</sup> He did not reform Hinduism from a degenerated form back to a pristine original form. Vedanta never was the original Hinduism but a special form of ancient Hinduism, a special stream within it. Second, Rammohun propagated the study of the main texts of Vedanta by publishing his own vernacular translations of some of the Upanishads, the oldest sources of Vedanta. This may look Protestant but at the same time, these texts did not represent the Bible of Hinduism. Rammohun made them into the Bible of his brand of new Vedanta Hinduism. Third, Rammohun copied the Protestant church model to organise his Vedanta innovation in a congregational form. This part of the innovation was not very successful as far as attracting voluntary membership to his Vedantic church. The first and second innovations met with greater success because that mode has in fact determined the popular perception of modern Hinduism as a whole. It is good to stress once more that Rammohun propagated Vedanta, i.e. the Upanishads, as Hindu scriptures *par excellence*, and that his idea of real Hinduism was a religion based on the teachings of the Upanishads and thus relatively free from all kinds of elaborate Hindu rituals. Vedanta could be adhered to voluntarily by anyone who felt attraction for its teaching and spirituality.<sup>8</sup> For more than a century this perception has persisted of Vedanta as the pinnacle of Hinduism (free from ritual and inhuman customs but full of high philosophy and spirituality) and it is around even to this day. It was Rammohun and his followers who thought that Hinduism ought to be founded – anew in a way – on the Upanishads, and that Vedanta constituted the paramount meta-theology of Hinduism as a whole. Hence the propagation of the Upanishads to which later on the Bhagavad Gita was added, as the scriptures of Hinduism.

### **A modern Hindu canon**

An important step in the direction of renewal of Hinduism along Vedantic lines was the dissemination in printed form of its basic texts, i.e. the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Most editions (to this day) were bilingual in that the original Sanskrit was added to the vernacular translation. These printed editions of the Upanishads and Bhagavad Gita were the Hindu answer to the Christian missionaries' promoting the Bible in Indian languages. Hindu Protestantism really boils down to propagating among practising upper-caste urbanised Hindus the study and spirituality of classical Vedantic texts, texts with which such Hindus were not at all familiar. Yet the texts were also reinterpreted to meet the social challenges of the times. One could call the Hindu Protestantisation perhaps with equal validity a

modernising revival of Vedanta philosophy, theology and spirituality, an amalgam of ancient and modern that was distinctly different from and alien to the everyday practice of lived Hinduism (especially in the rural areas into which this Vedantist revival cum reform never reached).

Propagating texts as sources of Hinduism, as scriptures even, not only was an important innovation of the Hindu reformers in the wake of Rammohun Roy, it also raised the question of selection and canonisation of Hindu texts. The question was not only 'propagating Hindu texts?' but also 'propagating which Hindu texts?'. Obviously, Hinduism was not and is not a religion of the Book. Yet Hinduism possesses an abundance of texts in Sanskrit and in the vernaculars. Some of these texts are regarded as very sacred, other texts are less so, while many texts are not really religious in nature. In its widest meaning one would have to regard the whole of Sanskrit literature of the ages as in a way constituting the Hindu canon. Yet, none of these texts is exclusively and universally recognised as the sole canonical source per se to the exclusion of all other texts.<sup>9</sup> This was the problem that stared the Hindu reformers of the nineteenth century in the face, starting with Rammohun Roy. A canon of reformed Hinduism should ideally be limited in size, ancient enough, universally recognised and authoritative enough to command universal respect, and most importantly: it should contain teachings that fit the exigencies of modern times.

Rammohun was the first to have an idea of a limited Hindu canon along these lines. His demand of a Hindu canon was that it would promulgate a monotheistic theology, be free from elaborate ritual and emphasise personal spiritual growth. An extra benefit of an ideal Hindu canon would also be that it was free from specific narratives highlighting specific Hindu Gods or divine heroes. The texts should be of high antiquity, bear great cultural and religious authority and be appropriate to showcase to outsiders as well, for also outsiders should be able to admire these texts. As stated, Rammohun propagated Vedantic texts as the Hindu canon, precisely because they more or less fulfilled these exigencies. The Vedantic texts had some added benefits. They were already commented upon by the great Hindu theologian Shankara in the eighth century CE, and their ideas could be recognised within a wealth of later Hindu texts such as the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, and the numerous Puranas. Moreover, the Upanishads were regarded as part of the Vedas, the oldest Hindu texts in Sanskrit. The choice for the Upanishads was further animated by the fact that Europeans (and even the Moghul prince Dara Shikoh before them) admired the philosophy and theology of the Upanishads. With hindsight Rammohun's rediscovery and promotion of the Upanishads (and in its wake the promulgation of the Bhagavad Gita as well) seems to have been a natural and most obvious choice for an innovation of Hinduism. The ideas of Vedantic texts indeed lend themselves very well to modernising interpretations without having to use a hermeneutical sledge-hammer to make these texts say the things a modern reformer wants them to say. Some of the ideas of the Upanishads

seem to coincide very well with modernity as a state of mind. Why this is so and how Vedantic texts like the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita were turned into sources of modernity (with strong Hindu overtones) is the subject of the chapters that follow.

An important issue that Rammohun and those that came after him faced was: how to mobilise people behind this newly found Vedantist/Hindu modern state of mind? As we will discuss in the chapter on Rammohun, there was the foundation of the first Hindu 'Protestant Church', the Brahmo Samaj. Also this move was an innovation unparalleled in traditional Hinduism, because the Christian church model did not exist in Hinduism. Hinduism was not and largely still is not organised in church-like congregational form. Traditional Hinduism is practised at home, in temples, in large public festivals and pilgrimages to sacred places (including famous temples). But there is nothing like a Hindu church, neither along the Roman Catholic centralised model, nor along the more decentralised and autonomous Protestant models. There is no centrally trained and directed clergy in Hinduism. Rammohun's invention of the Brahmo Samaj was a model that later Hindu reformers emulated widely though. Yet the formal membership of these congregations or societies (samajes) was always extremely small, a few thousand nationwide at the most. The church model was not the most effective way to disseminate modernity even if the Hindu reform church, like the Brahmo Samaj, attracted wide attention, sympathy and criticism far beyond the actual number of real members. The reform movements were certainly widely talked about. One might say that the Brahmo Samaj and its successor movements exerted a great social charismatic influence without attracting many actual followers. This influence can be attributed more to the movement's publishing of booklets, pamphlets and magazines, rather than to active recruitment of members. In the course of the nineteenth century, publications on Hindu/Vedantist reform both in Bengali and English multiplied exponentially. Along with this the format of dissemination of ideas through organisation shifted away from the Christian church model to a more indigenous model. The Hindu public was made aware of a written Hindu canon through print and of social Hindu reform practice through a form of Hindu organisation that Hindus could recognise as indigenous. In this same period there was a shift of emphasis from the Upanishads to the Bhagavad Gita. The latter, embedded in the great epic Mahabharata, gradually came to be regarded as the main source of Vedantic spirituality and even as the Hindu Bible *par excellence*. This is largely due to Bankimchandra Chatterjee who promoted the Bhagavad Gita as the most important scripture of Hinduism. As far as organising Vedantist innovation is concerned, what were the changes taking place over the course of the latter half of the nineteenth century? In order to appreciate the shift in emphasis and the change in modality of the organisation of reform, we have to look at the way traditional day-to-day lived Hinduism 'works'.

## **World-renunciation**

We have already noted how scholars of Hinduism claimed that ‘Hinduism’ is a Western concept projected onto the bewildering multiplicity of actual religious practices in India, in so far as they do not derive from other known world-religions.<sup>10</sup> The unity behind Hinduism – at least that which makes people (insiders and outsiders alike) recognise the amalgam of local, regional or supranational practices, rituals, festivals, Gods, sacred texts, social structuring, as forming part of Hinduism – this unity is found in the sociology of Hinduism, not in the accidentals of local traditions.<sup>11</sup> The social hierarchy and the notion of ritual purity belong to the main features of the sociological architecture of Hinduism. Next to this hierarchical notion of Hindu society stands its complement: the total rejection and renunciation of this social structure. To put it succinctly: Hinduism is the binary model of sacred hierarchical social order on the one hand, and the sphere of world-renunciation on the other. Rituals and social order, caste, class, hierarchy, the cults of the different Hindu Gods and Goddesses are all the domain of the social moiety of Hinduism. Spirituality, self-realisation, release from suffering are the domain of world-renunciation. The world-renouncer is the one who strives for final insight, supreme devotion to God, realisation of the Self, intuitive insight in supreme truth, release from rebirth and suffering. The renouncer can only realise such goals by retreating from all social and family ties, obligations and all else that binds him or her to caste, class, gender and concomitant duties. World-renunciation is the sphere in which Hinduism develops its wide variety of philosophies, theologies, soteriologies, private devotions, personal mysticism, religious virtuosity. World-renunciation for many means the sphere of Hindu monkhood. When renouncers gather as a group they could be regarded as a band of Hindu monks (or nuns as the case may be). Hindu monastic orders are many and as an institution monasticism traces its origins back almost to the times of Buddha. World-renunciation could and still does appear in two modalities: either as solitary world-renouncing ascetics or as initiated members of monastic orders. All great Indian religious leaders from the times of the Upanishads and Buddha onwards were mostly world-renouncers or used the idiom of world-renunciation.<sup>12</sup> Thus renunciation, in whatever modality, is the sphere from which spirituality emerges and to which individual seekers after truth and religious meaning can turn. Importantly: one cannot choose one’s station in the Hindu social hierarchical order, but one can opt voluntarily for renouncing this order, in other words, to renounce the (Hindu social) world.

It is not without significance that Rammohun chose the Upanishads as his new Bible of Hinduism. The Upanishads are the earliest texts in which world-renunciation is mentioned as spiritual practice and goal, the sphere in which ultimate truths are revealed.<sup>13</sup> Traditionally it was mostly (Brahmin) world-renouncers who studied and transmitted the Upanishads.<sup>14</sup> Thus the emphasis on the classical Upanishads in the early nineteenth century not



only helped innovations of Hinduism, it also implicitly pointed to the sphere of world-renunciation as the sphere from which renewal, private spirituality and innovation should emerge. Since the first millennium in India, renunciation had been a dominant element in Hindu religious life. In the words of Olivelle: 'In most Hindu sects the renouncer was considered the paradigmatic holy man. These sects were for the most part founded and led by renouncers' (Olivelle 1993: 170). The Hindu sects were the places or institutions to which one could turn for personal Hindu religious quests, precisely the motivation that drew Rammohun to the Upanishads. But evidently the church model did not provide the answers to personal religious quests. If the dissemination of Upanishadic thought and inspiration was to be successful, it had to return to the model of the traditional Hindu renunciatory sect.

With world-renunciation along Vedantic lines we are also back to where we started: individual autonomy, personal freedom, self-realisation and the flourishing of the individual, for these are the values that to nineteenth-century modernising Hindu perception seemed to be embedded in Vedantic texts. In the chapter on Debendranath we will show this in greater detail. The chapter on Bankim also reviews the way in which the Bhagavad Gita was made to serve the cause of Hindu modernisation, along with the stress on world-renunciation (but not in an individual but in a collective mode) to bring about collective social and political change. Rammohun's Vedanta seems to have primarily addressed the modernisation of the Hindu individual, a modernisation which includes individual liberty and emancipation from traditional religious impediments. With Bankim the emphasis is on collective emancipation and collective self-realisation for which the Bhagavad Gita becomes the supreme textual source of inspiration. Thus a division emerges between on the one hand Upanishadic modernisation and on the other emancipation on the basis of the Bhagavad Gita. This division is traced further in the chapter on Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo for the collective form, and the last (and longest) chapter which deals with Rabindranath Tagore and his ideas on individual emancipation, a thing which he valued far above collectivist emancipation of whatever kind. Although Rabindranath regarded the Upanishads as his prime spiritual sources of inspiration, he read and interpreted them in a very personal non-dogmatic fashion. In this way he exemplified in his own work how he felt about the idea of individual emancipation which for him remained vague, non-committal, grasped through artistic intuition rather than through scholastic hermeneutical or philological acumen. For him emancipation was not a straight line towards a fixed goal but a meandering journey towards distant ever receding horizons. For Rabindranath the Upanishads spoke in evocative spiritual poetry to the individual person. The Upanishads, received in this manner, could elicit a personal spiritual response in the hearer. It is remarkable that his writings are replete with references to the Upanishads but the Bhagavad Gita he quotes rarely.

In all the writings of all figures mentioned, the notion of world-renunciation in an informal (non-sectarian) way is palpable, for world-renunciation represents the final break with worldly Hindu social tradition, the break with the past, and it opens up space for renewal and innovation of Hinduism. All authors mentioned here looked to the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita as major sources of spiritual and renovated Hinduism. All authors mentioned earlier have tried to promote these texts as universal sources of Hindu inspiration.

There is yet one other division between these authors. Broadly speaking, those who stressed collective Hindu modernity on the basis of the Bhagavad Gita – especially Bankim and Aurobindo – became icons of later Hindu communalists.<sup>15</sup> Those who stressed the Upanishads – mainly Rammohun and Rabindranath – are icons of Indian individualist liberalism and the struggle against Hindu chauvinism and jingoism. Indian liberals nowadays, like Sagarika Ghose, insist that their notions of individual freedom and equality of opportunity and equality of all human beings derives from Vedantic philosophy (cf. Ghose 2018: 88ff). Some attribute the origin of modern Hindu communalism to Bankim, whereas Rabindranath is greatly revered as the leading light of secularism and humanism, both in India and in Muslim-majority Bangladesh (in spite of the fact that Rabindranath was not a Muslim and seldom refers to Islam in his religious writings).<sup>16</sup> Many Indians (intellectuals, some of them convinced Marxists) regard Rabindranath as a pillar of Indian secularism even though many of his writings breathe an atmosphere of indefinable religiosity. Whereas in the writings of Bankim, and in the writings and practices of Vivekananda and Aurobindo, world-renunciation is real and physical – those who are called upon to save and renew India are factually a kind of monk – in Rabindranath the renunciation is individual and psychological: the person living in society abandons traditional practices and ideas and thus modernises himself or herself. Rabindranath did not endorse monkhood or retreating from the world. His renunciation is internal, not factual. In sum we could say that all forms of Hindu modernity are Vedantic in nature and consist in bringing traditional Hindu world-renunciation into the Hindu social world in order to fundamentally change the latter. This is possible because those who are renouncers have practically and psychologically rejected traditional society. They filled their minds with the Vedantic idea of self-realisation. The latter does not mean freedom from constant rebirth (as is the goal of traditional world-renunciation) but freedom from social peer pressure and traditional social constraints like caste, social hierarchy, rules concerning untouchability and similar taboos. This is precisely how the Vedantic texts could replace traditional orthopractic Hinduism with the internalisation of the idea of individual autonomy and personal freedom. The traditional binary sociological model of Hinduism as outlined earlier now seems to have collapsed into a single new system of Hindu modernity in which individual emancipation led

to the idea of citizenship, and collective emancipation inspired progressive anti-colonial nationalism but also Hindu communalism.

### **Why these authors?**

Earlier we had already indicated that Hindu reform started with Rammohun and his Vedantic reinvention of Hinduism. His goal was to inform his Indian (but also foreign) audiences of the existence of the Upanishads on whose basis Hinduism ought to be reformed. One of his methods was through new forms of organising Hindu 'believers'. For this purpose he had founded the Brahmo Samaj which attracted little following but yet set an example, because its membership was voluntary. The Brahmo Samaj as an organisation acted as a prototype for similar reform movements (see for instance Jones 1989). Rammohun's other method was through publishing books and pamphlets. These created a reading public. Apparently to reach Hindu audiences the spread of printed material proved more effective than inviting them to join a (Hindu) congregation. The intended audience of Rammohun's texts was primarily limited to educated urbanised middle-class upper-caste (Bengali) Hindus. It was within this group that a kind of modern Indian Hindu bourgeoisie formed itself, the same kind of class that became increasingly active in politics in the course of the nineteenth century. From this class emerged many of the protagonists of Indian Independence (for details on the Hindu/Brahmo bourgeoisie see Kopf 1979). What Rammohun had started with modest success further expanded in the nineteenth century into a wide-ranging public discourse on the modernisation of Hinduism with concomitant values such as individual emancipation, personal choice of lifestyle and means of generating income, and the idea of personal autonomy. Through print-capitalism these values were disseminated among an ever-expanding receptive audience. This system of dissemination of ideas through print stimulated the rapid development of public taste in literary productions, which in turn required ever higher standards of style on the part of authors of texts (be it essays on Hinduism or modern genres like the novel, the sonnet, the ballad, the song, the ode, etc.; they were literary forms that had no counterpart in either Sanskrit or the traditional literatures in the vernaculars). In this study we will focus on such authors as were most influential, whose writings constituted significant innovations in modernising Hindu discourse, and lastly whose writings are still being studied today. This latter fact suggests that these authors had something to say that is enduring, and helped fundamentally shape what could be called a modern Hindu mentality or modern Hindu self. Some authors like Bankim and Rabindranath contributed to the modern literary culture of Bengali. Bankim was the first modern novelist in Bengali, Rabindranath the first genuinely modern poet. Vivekananda was not a literary figure but mainly a philosophically minded preacher of Hindu Vedantic ideas, whereas Aurobindo was a leader of opinion, an essayist, a political activist and a poet. In this

study we will highlight those texts in which important contributions to modern Hindu philosophical and theological thinking are found. In some cases these texts include poetry (mostly by Rabindranath), but the majority of the selected texts is prose: essays, adhortations, speeches, pamphlets.

What all these authors also have in common is the fact that they were builders of institutions whether religious or educational. The only exception is Bankim whose social influence derives solely from his literary output. Rammohun had pioneered the foundation of modern Hindu religious organisations (with a strong social reformist element as well) when founding the Brahmo Samaj. Debendranath not only wrote but also expanded the membership of the Brahmo Samaj, while streamlining its liturgy and providing it with a sacred source book (the Brahmo Dharma). Keshub (initially Debendranath's disciple) built his own Brahmo Samaj. Sri Ramakrishna was neither an author nor an institution-builder, but through his religious charisma he had laid the foundation on which his most prominent disciple Vivekananda could build the Ramakrishna Mission, to date probably still the most prestigious Vedantic Hindu movement with branches all over India and abroad. The Ramakrishna Mission served as a model for similar Vedantic movements founded in the course of the twentieth century. Aurobindo was not only a prolific author, but also an organiser: first of a political/military revolution against British rule in India, later of his ashram in Pondicherry. Rabindranath Tagore did not found a religious organisation but educational ones. In Santiniketan he started experimenting with new forms of modern education and used the money of the Nobel Prize (which he received in 1913) to help found his Visva-Bharati university in Santiniketan. From its foundation in 1921 this university attracted international scholars. Visva-Bharati has long been regarded as one of the leading hubs of modern Bengali culture and Indian culture in general. Rabindranath also experimented with rural development in a centre near Santiniketan, which he called Sriniketan. But as with Bankim, Rabindranath's literary output had an enormous impact on Indian people in general. Modern Bengali culture (both in India and Bangladesh) is unthinkable without him. The charisma of all the figures just enumerated was able to noticeably influence the reading public: the sources of their charisma were the texts they produced, the institutions they had built and the particular lifestyle they followed. All these facts made them stand out from the rest of Hindu authors, activists, political figures.

## Notes

- 1 On the separation of East Pakistan, see Zaheer (1995); for a recent work on the history of Bangladesh, see Van Schendel (2009). This separation was not on religious grounds but rather on economic and linguistic ones.
- 2 Most contributors to Dalmia and von Stietencron could certainly be classified as not sympathetic to Hindu chauvinism. The volume edited by Bloch has contributors of which the political sympathies are definitely the opposite of, for instance,

Partha Chatterjee, Sudipta Kaviraj and Gyanendra Pandey who are included in Dalmia's volume.

- 3 As regards postcolonial theory in general I am thinking of seminal works like Edward Said: *Orientalism* (1978, 2003, 1994); Aijaz Ahmad (2008). Contributions from a South Asian perspective are: Partha Chatterjee (1993, 1993a); Breckenridge and van der Veer (1993); Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (1988); Chakravorty Spivak (1999, 2013).
- 4 I call them followers of Hinduism, not believers because the latter would sound like Christians believing in Christianity. Hinduism is not a religion of beliefs but of ritual practices. Hence I avoid the term believer to indicate those who practise Hinduism. In popular parlance one can often hear Hinduism designated as one of the great beliefs of the world, meaning one of the great religions of the world. The words 'belief' and 'believer' in respect of Hinduism are misleading and incorrect, even though it should not be denied that some Hindus do entertain beliefs or believe in what they are practising.
- 5 In the sequel we will refer to Rammohun Roy simply as Rammohun, thus following a custom in Indian writing in English to refer to such well-known figures by their first name. Similarly, Swami Vivekananda will be referred to as Vivekananda, Sri Aurobindo as Aurobindo and Arabindo (for the period before 1910), Bankimchandra Chatterjee as Bankim, Rabindranath Tagore as Rabindranath or occasionally Tagore, and Debendranath Tagore as Debendranath. Lastly, Keshub Chunder Sen will be referred to as Keshub. The somewhat odd spellings in English of their names is retained, as under these spellings these figures have been well-known and written about since the nineteenth century.
- 6 On the widow-burning in his own family, cf. Dobson Collet (1988: 40–1) and on the general abolition of widow-burning op. cit. (247–81, 425–31). Rammohun's own writings against widow-burning is found in Rammohun Roy, *The English Works*, III (87–138).
- 7 Throughout this book the term Vedanta is used in a perhaps somewhat loose way, referring to the ideas found primarily in the Upanishads, in the Bhagavad Gita and in the Brahma Sutra. Vedanta is not meant to refer strictly to a particular Hindu theological school. Even though Rammohun based his interpretations of these texts on the commentaries of Shankara, he also took some distance to the Hindu sociological implications of Shankara's writings. Throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth century it is not wrong to refer to Vedanta as the loosely designated ideology/theology/soteriology derived from the previously mentioned texts. The authors discussed in this book used the term Vedanta in this loose way to indicate their sources of inspiration.
- 8 I keep this term vague on purpose. We will see in the later chapters how this spirituality played out in practice.
- 9 This is of course the way the Bible is the sole canon of Christianity. All the other texts of antiquity that dealt with Christian doctrine and pretended to be written by apostles were not included in the canon. The Christian canon was almost universally recognised as consisting of the 27 texts of the New Testament. For the Old Testament the Greek texts of the Septuaginta was the canonical version used by early Christians. All this is not there in Hinduism. There is nothing like the Hindu Old Testament and New Testament and thus neither are there so-called apocryphical texts. The Hindu sacred literature does not distinguish between canonical and apocryphical; this distinction is typical of Christianity.
- 10 The major world-religions beside Hinduism are found in India: Islam, Buddhism, Jainism, Christianity, Judaism, Zoroastrianism.
- 11 The problem of real multiplicity and our imposition of unity on it is behind much debate on how to define Hinduism. Louis Dumont has actually proposed

this sociological reading of Hinduism (Dumont 1980: 267–86, 425–39). In spite of all the criticism it invited, it seems the theory had got something right (see Michaels 2004: 10–13). For a large collection of Indian critiques of Dumont's approach, cf. Khare (2006).

- 12 I am aware that these generalisations are extremely broad and would probably be regarded as undue homogenisation of the multiplicity of real-life Hinduism. The binary scheme is no more than a helpful instrument to try and make sense of the multiplicity and to provide some context for the Hindu/Vedantic innovation that began with Rammohun.
- 13 The famous Katha Upanishad is a case in point. In its first two chapters it is already made clear that the Vedic rituals do not suffice for ultimate salvation: one needs to renounce worldly pleasures and life in order to realise one's true immortal Self (cf. Olivelle 1996: 232–8). As to the probable date of this Upanishad, Olivelle assigns it to the last few centuries BCE (Olivelle 1996: xxxvii). The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad, probably the earliest Upanishad and predating the Katha by several centuries, has a passage that already seems to point to world-renunciation. The famous dialogue between Maitreyi and Yajnavalkya occurs twice in it (Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad 2.4 and 4.5). In both versions of the dialogue Yajnavalkya announces his departure and leaves Maitreyi with his wisdom (cf. Olivelle 1996: 28–30, 69–71).
- 14 An historical overview of world-renunciation in relation to the later Upanishads is found in Olivelle (1992: 11–97).
- 15 Communalism is a typically Indian-English word designating the often aggressive struggle of religious majorities against religious minorities. Concretely: the struggle of Hindus against Muslims or vice versa. Enlightened liberal Indians regard communalism as the religious bane of both colonial and independent India. Secular-minded Pakistanis and Bangladeshis are of very similar opinions.
- 16 Rabindranath wrote mostly in his native Bengali, a language that is also the national language of Bangladesh.

## 2 Western modernity and religious ethic

### Weber on capitalism

In the previous chapter we had highlighted the concept of modernity as state of mind entailing individual autonomy, freedom both individual and collective, and imagining novel forms of arranging one's own life. The locus of these aspects of modernity was and is the human mind. We had started out with questioning the 'Westernness' of modernity in spite of Siedentop's claim that the emergence of 'individual freedom' is not only Western but even Christian in origin. We will explore the alleged link between individual freedom and Christianity in greater detail in this chapter. The main reason for doing this is to investigate the ideological connections between Christianity and Western modernity. This connection suggests that the internalisation of some forms of religious ideology prepare the ground for the mentality of modernity, that is to say, the state of mind that leads to modernity in the world of social and political life. If we can understand how Christianity stimulated modernity in the West, we are in a good position to unravel how Vedantic religion created an Indian version of modernity. For the Western version we have to look at the historical development of capitalism and the nation-state.

In order to clarify this development we should turn our attention to the origins of the mentality informing the capitalist system of production and distribution, because this system, or in its shorthand form, capitalism, has come to be identified with all the ills and blessings of modern life. Karl Marx and his leftist precursors and contemporaries had sought to understand, explain and combat capitalism. What they actually fought against were the inhuman aberrations of individual capitalists. They often exposed the intimate links that existed between capitalists, feudal lords and those that held the reins of state power. The burden of the nineteenth- and twentieth-century leftist critique of capitalism is not purely economic but also ethical. Capitalism is criticised mainly for its aberrations: gross abuses of power, the power of money in league with governmental power. At a deeper level the system of capitalism as a more efficient means of producing wealth and as a potential motor of humanistic development is not criticised.<sup>1</sup> Leftists

demanding greater diffusion of power, demanding wider popular control over the flows of money and goods circulating within the present capitalist world system. Exploitation resulted from capitalism misapplied and needed to be rectified by democratic resistance. In this chapter we will review the origins of the mentality behind both capitalism and political revolution as prominent factors of modernity. Again the emphasis lies on the mentality informing these social phenomena. The description of the contours of Western modernity in this chapter is necessarily brief and sketchy and only meant to provide the background to the development of modernity in India.

Ever since Max Weber first published his *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, the main ideas defended in this essay never ceased to generate controversy. Weber's contemporaries in Germany probably misunderstood him without having fully digested what he was trying to argue. But the 'Weber thesis' only gained more advocates and opponents when Talcott Parsons published his English translation of the book in 1930. Debates on Weber still continue.<sup>2</sup>

Leaving aside the details of the controversy that Weber's *Protestant Ethic* has sparked off, the essentials are not seriously in question. Its importance for the study of the mentality of Indian modernity lies in the links it establishes between an eminently physical/social phenomenon: modern capitalism and a profoundly religious ethic. Weber's book can be regarded as a case study on the social transformative power of thoroughly internalised religious beliefs. The power of Weber's book lies also in the wealth of historical material and primary sources. Weber knew his ancient, late medieval and Protestant sources at first hand.

What precisely did Weber argue in his *Protestant Ethic*?<sup>3</sup> From the outset Weber is very careful about the claims he is going to make:

If any inner relationship between certain expressions of the old Protestant spirit and modern capitalistic culture is to be found, we must attempt to find it . . . in its purely religious characteristics.

(Weber 2001: 11)

In Weber's view, capitalism in general is an 'attitude which seeks profit rationally and systematically'.<sup>4</sup> But this attitude is not based on economic considerations, but religious ones. In order to show the spirit behind 'modern capitalistic culture', Weber quotes from two writings by Benjamin Franklin (1706–90): 'Advice to a Young Tradesman' and 'Necessary Hints to Those That would Be Rich'. Some of the most representative maxims of Franklin are:

- Time is money;
- Credit is money;
- Money can beget money;
- The good paymaster is lord of another man's purse;



- Be mindful of what you owe;
- Honesty increases your credit;
- He that idly loses five shillings' worth of time, loses five shillings, and might as prudently throw five shillings into the sea.<sup>5</sup>

This business advice constitutes an ethos (Weber 2001: 17). Weber explains that the 'earning of money within the modern economic order, is, so long as it is done legally, the result and the expression of virtue and proficiency in a calling' (Weber 2001: 19). Weber's thematic is to investigate how this came about, or in his own words to 'form a contribution to the understanding of the manner in which ideas become effective forces in history' (Weber 2001: 48) and 'to ascertain whether and to what extent religious forces have taken part in the qualitative formation and the quantitative expansion of that spirit [i.e. of capitalism] over the world' (Weber 2001: 49). This can only be done 'by investigating whether and at what points certain correlations between forms of religious belief and *practical ethics* [emphasis added] can be worked out' (Weber 2001: 49). Investigating the religious forces that furthered the ethics of capitalism leads Weber to an even wider thematic, namely 'to what extent the historical development of *modern culture* [emphasis added] can be attributed to those religious forces' (Weber 2001: 50). These carefully worded sentences suggest that Protestant religiosity inculcated in its conscious and willing followers a strong ethic fostering modern capitalism and modernity itself in Europe. If ideas 'become effective forces in history', then in order to find the origins of (Western) modernity we have to investigate more closely certain strongly held ideas and assumptions. Contrary to popular Marxism, Weber believed in the primacy of human motivation and culture over the economy.<sup>6</sup>

What is the Protestant ethic Weber is talking about? The first element is the typically Protestant idea of the 'calling', 'in the sense of a life-task, a definite field in which to work' (Weber 2001: 39). In Weber's view this idea implied a clean break with medieval Roman Catholic monasticism. The calling was 'the fulfilment of the obligation imposed upon the individual by his *position in the world* [emphasis added]' (Weber 2001: 40). Monastic life has no justification in the eyes of God, according to Protestant ethics and theology, but living and working in the world is enjoined by God.

Protestantism not only rejected Catholic monasticism, it rejected almost everything else associated with traditional religion as practised in late medieval Europe: church ritual such as the need to celebrate the holy Mass as a kind of expiation (because the most perfect sacrifice had already been performed by Jesus on the Cross); cults of saints; belief in the salvation through the Catholic church as an organisation; the sanctity and authority of the Pope as the vicar of Christ on earth; obedience to ecclesiastical and aristocratic hierarchies as ordained by God. Rejecting all these is a general characteristic of the Reformation. They flow from the central ethic of the Reformation: the centrality of the Bible itself as the sole authority

in religious matters; the primacy of conscience in matters of obedience to worldly authority; the emphasis on religious education of everybody in the vernaculars; the immediate and direct relationship between the believers and God without priestly intermediaries; and a strong sense of individual responsibility.

Weber does not discuss these general characteristics of Protestantism but instead concentrates on its Calvinist form. It was the Calvinist, and subsequent Puritan, doctrine of Predestination that Weber identifies as an essential motivation of the capitalist spirit. Predestination meant that no religious merit can be attached to personal worth or virtue, but salvation rests entirely on the sovereign will of God. God elects some to be saved and others to be doomed. This left the believer completely alone with no external help. Rituals, priests and personal ethical merit are of no avail (cf. Weber 2001: 59–61). Weber sums up the consequent attitude to life as negative to ‘all the sensuous and emotional elements in culture and in religion, because they are of no use toward salvation and promote sentimental illusions and idolatrous superstitions’ (Weber 2001: 62). Exclusive ‘trust in God’ is all there is for the Calvinist Puritan. Some are elected by God, others are not. But no one knows whether he or she is elected or not to eternal salvation. This doubt did not act as a brake on social organisation but rather fostered it. In a closely knit passage Weber explains this:

The world exists to serve the glorification of God and for that purpose alone. The elected Christian is in the world only to increase this glory of God by fulfilling His commandments to the best of his ability. But God requires social achievements of the Christian because He wills that social life shall be organized according to His commandments, in accordance with that purpose. The social activity of the Christian in the world is solely activity *in majorem gloriam Dei* [for the greater glory of God]. This character is hence shared by labour in a calling which serves the mundane life of the community. . . .

Brotherly love . . . only practiced for the glory of God . . . is expressed in the first place in the fulfilment of the daily tasks . . . in the interest of the rational organization of our social environment.

(Weber 2001: 64)

To further the glory of God and not one’s own greatness or even self-interest is the motivation towards a rational organisation of the social environment. In concrete terms: improving the material infrastructure of society and building a comfortable society means promoting God’s greatness. The doctrine of Predestination taught that God has from the beginning of the world only elected some to salvation. As nothing concerning ultimate salvation rests on human merit, one must simply live and act for God’s glory. Whether one is really elected or not does not make any difference. It is ‘an absolute duty to consider oneself chosen, and to combat all doubts as temptations

of the devil, since lack of self-confidence is the result of insufficient faith' (Weber 2001: 66). For faith and self-confidence are the signs of possible future Divine grace:

The community of the elect with their God could only take place and be perceptible to them in that God worked . . . through them and that they were conscious of it. That is, their action originated from the faith caused by God's grace, and this faith in turn justified itself by the quality of that action.

(Weber 2001: 68)

In practice this means that God helps those who help themselves. Thus the Calvinist . . . himself creates his own salvation, or, as would be more correct, the conviction of it . . . is a systematic self-control which at every moment stands before the inexorable alternative, chosen or damned.

(Weber 2001: 69–70)

This constant prodding faith and self-control in order to achieve a rational organisation of the social world is what Weber famously calls the 'worldly asceticism' of Calvinist Protestantism. In a way this asceticism also answers the question why the 'horrendous doctrine' of Predestination did not lead to total fatalism but rather its opposite. But Calvinists themselves subsume the 'worldly asceticism' and its impact on the social world under the head of 'sanctification of daily life' or 'sanctification of the world'.<sup>7</sup> Weber, however, regards the 'combination of [Calvinist Puritan] faith in absolutely valid norms with absolute determinism and the complete transcendentality of God' a 'product of great genius' and 'much more modern than the milder doctrine' of, among others, the Lutherans, 'making greater concessions to the feelings which subjected God to the moral law' (Weber 2001: 78). God, in Weber's reading of Calvinism, is almost a symbol of the impersonality of the universe itself. The total absence of any human emotion or human characteristic in the Calvinist God, makes Him in Weber's view a profound token of modernity itself.

Returning once more to the Protestant concept of the calling, Weber observes that its social usefulness 'is measured primarily in moral terms, and thus in terms of the importance of the goods produced in it for the community' (Weber 2001: 108). But its most important criterion in practice is 'found in private profitableness' (Weber 2001: 108). The acquisition of wealth is only reprehensible in so far as it 'is a temptation to idleness and sinful enjoyment of life' (Weber 2001: 108). Wealth should only be accumulated as a sign of God's grace and to further God's glory, not for personal enjoyment. Precisely in this ascetic mentality Weber locates the spirit of modern capitalism. The fixed calling 'provided an ethical justification of the modern specialized division of labour' (Weber 2001: 109). The

same asceticism also furthered a spirit of anti-authoritarianism and revolt against feudal lords and monarchs who were seen as self-indulging pleasure-seekers (cf. Weber 2001: 112). Industrial standardisation and uniformity of the production as well as our modern way of dressing, Weber interprets as deriving from the Puritan repudiation of idolatry of the flesh (cf. Weber 2001: 114, 249).

Weber recapitulates his findings as follows: worldly Protestant asceticism 'restricted consumption' of superfluous 'luxuries'; it superseded traditional inhibitions against the 'acquisition of goods'; it struggled 'against the irrational use of wealth'; and finally 'approved the rational and utilitarian uses of wealth which were willed by God for the needs of the individual and the community' (Weber 2001: 115). The Puritan outlook 'favoured the development of a rational bourgeois economic life', standing at 'the cradle of the modern economic man' (Weber 2001: 117). This outlook not only stimulated the businessman, it 'provided him in addition with sober, conscientious, and unusually industrious workmen, who clung to their work as to a life purpose willed by God' (Weber 2001: 120). In a long note Weber adds that the Protestants are 'the pioneers of skilled labour' (Weber 2001: 258). For Weber this Protestant asceticism 'undertook to remodel the world and to work out its ideals' causing 'material goods' to exert 'an inexorable power over the lives of men as at no previous period in history' (Weber 2001: 124). It is important to note that the capitalism Weber is talking about has nothing to do with merchants and trade. Capitalism is the ideology of the emerging class of entrepreneurs who manufacture goods. This manufacture heralds the advent of modern industrial production. This form of production – later stimulated by the industrial revolution – was a new phenomenon, whereas trade is as old as humanity. Capitalism aims at the steady increase of wealth through industry and continuous exertion (cf. Weber 2001: 17). Puritan religious ethics thus released a tremendous creative energy that transformed the traditional world into the modern world.

## **Social activism**

In a study on the origins of modern Western politics, Hancock (1989: 162) argues that John Calvin (1509–64) himself had laid the foundation of this-worldly social activism. Supporting Weber's thesis, Hancock maintains that the reason for this activism lies within Calvin's double doctrine of 'without knowledge of self there is no knowledge of God' and 'without knowledge of God there is no knowledge of self'. God's glory has one direction:

the thriving of the creation, particularly of the rational instincts of innocent human nature. . . . Man must not even attempt to cultivate consciousness of God's power as an inward feeling . . . for this is . . . to obstruct God's sheer activity. Consciousness of [God's] power is

not a benefit to the [human] soul but a spur to action. To be conscious of God's power, to contemplate God's will. . . , is to continually enact it.

(Hancock 1989: 162)

Man 'lives and moves' in God, because the Spirit lives and moves in man. . . . The relationship between man and God is the governing instance of union without fusion. . . . It is . . . the ground on which Calvin radically distinguishes politics and religion in order to unify them in worldly activity for the prosperous preservation of man-kind and the glory of God.

(Hancock 1989: 163)

The knowledge of God and self and self and God is the point at which God's will on earth can be enacted. Although God is totally transcendental, He works through people. In fact, everything owes its existence wholly to God alone. This point is emphasised in the very beginning of Calvin's main work the *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, to which Hancock is referring. Calvin writes about God's creation:

[God's] essence, indeed, is incomprehensible, utterly transcending all human thought; but on each of his works his glory is engraven in characters so bright, so distinct, and so illustrious, that none, however dull and illiterate, can plead ignorance . . . wherever you turn your eyes, there is no portion of the world, however minute, that does not exhibit at least some sparks of beauty; while it is impossible to contemplate the vast and beautiful fabric as it extends around, without being overwhelmed by the immense weight of glory.

(Calvin, *Institutes*, Book I, Chapter V, Paragraph 1)

### **The privateness of conscience**

An important component of Calvinist ideology with revolutionary consequences was the doctrine of the freedom of conscience. The concept of "conscience" itself is a term from the Bible. It occurs only in the New Testament (e.g. Rom. 2:15; 9:1; 13:5; I Cor. 10:25, 10:27–8; 8:7; 10:9; II Cor. 4:2; 5:11; Hebr. 9:9, 14; 10:2, 22). The Greek word is *syneidèsis*. The Latin 'conscientia' from which 'conscience' is derived, is found also in the writings of the Roman statesman and philosopher Cicero (especially in *Tusc. Disp.* 2.64, 4.45 and *De natura deorum* 3.85). In earlier and contemporary non-Christian Greek texts *syneidèsis* meant either 'knowledge', 'consciousness', 'awareness' or 'consciousness of right and wrong'. Both meanings are also implied in Paul, who is the first source of the Christian doctrine of conscience. Both meanings are relevant for the Calvinist doctrine: the soul as inner witness is also the inner guide towards the knowledge of what is good.

Thus one needs no elaborate external regulations to govern one's life. All one needs to do is learning to listen to the inner voice of conscience. Calvin maintains that the definition of conscience

must be sought in the etymology of the word. For as men, when they apprehend the knowledge or *science*, so when they have a sense of the divine justice added as a witness which allows them not to conceal their sins, but drags them forward as culprits to the bar of God, that sense is called *conscience*. For it stands as it were between God and man, not suffering man to suppress what he knows himself.

(Calvin, Institutes, Book III, Chapt. XIX, par. 15)

Conscience, in other words, is a faculty by which every person is able to understand right and wrong, good and evil. This faculty follows upon and is superior to mind and intellect which only generate scientific knowledge. Conscience generates moral knowledge. Calvin discusses the obedience a person owes to human laws, and whether a person is obliged to obey any laws whatsoever.

If they [i.e. human laws] are imposed for the purpose of forming a religious obligation, as if the observance of them was in itself necessary, we say that the restraint thus laid on the conscience is unlawful. Our consciences have not to do with men but with God only.

(ibid., Book IV, Chapt. X, par. 5)

Obedience to authority, both worldly and ecclesiastical, is enjoined here, but only in general terms. Laws that step in between individuals and God and thus try to bind conscience need not be obeyed. Such laws are unlawful. Stretched to its logical conclusion, Calvin's interpretation of the New Testament concept of conscience, opened the possibility of political revolution: it inculcated obedience to God's will alone, which implies the potential disobedience to worldly political rulers. The obedience or non-obedience to rulers is thus left to the individual's own choice.<sup>8</sup>

The concept of conscience goes a long way to explain Siedentop's claims referred to in Chapter 1 about the Christian origins of individual freedom. For the inner voice of conscience is basically the mental locus where the individual person exerts the greatest amount of autonomy over him- or herself: not to do as he or she pleases but to contemplate what it is right to do and what is wrong. One could do the wrong thing as well, but one is free to choose, free either to listen to the voice of one's conscience or choose to ignore it. Especially in relation to obedience to an external power like a ruler or a magistrate, the doctrine of the freedom of private conscience defines the freedom of private judgement, a freedom which only fully makes sense within a social context. One acts always with regard to other persons. When one is totally isolated, one does not act within a social context. Any

act is only morally relevant or meaningful when there are those who may be affected by the act, good or bad. The voice of conscience would tell the person before the action whether it is a good or a bad action. It also tells the person when to obey external rules and when not to obey them.

### Calvinism and revolutions

The social changes that Western capitalism is supposed to have caused are huge. Probably no one has ‘glorified’ the global transformative power of capitalism – the ideology of the bourgeoisie – more than Karl Marx and Friedrich Engels in their *Manifesto of the Communist Party* published first in 1848:

The need of a constantly expanding market for its products chases the bourgeoisie over the whole of the globe. . . . The bourgeoisie has through its exploitation of the world market given a cosmopolitan character to its production and consumption in every country. . . .

The bourgeoisie, during its rule of scarce one hundred years, has created more massive and more colossal productive forces than have all preceding generations together. Subjection of Nature’s forces to man, machinery, application of chemistry to industry and agriculture, steam-navigation, railways, electric telegraphs, clearing of whole continents for cultivation . . . what earlier century had even a presentiment that such productive forces slumbered in the lap of social labour?

(McLellan 2011: 248–9)

We have here a fitting description of the material aspects of modernity. Read together with Weber’s arguments on the origins of the bourgeois capitalist mentality, we can appreciate the enormous global impact that Calvinist Protestantism is ultimately credited with. What Marx and Engels emphasise here is the great organisational energy of the bourgeoisie. Ultimately the huge profits made by capitalists were extracted from the labour force. Marx may have admired the acumen of eighteenth- and nineteenth-century businessmen, but otherwise he had nothing but disdain for their religious hypocrisy. Emancipatory politics, in Marx’s opinion, was the only answer to the plight of the proletariat. But in this respect, Marx did not deviate from another aspect attributed to Calvinism, namely modern democratic politics.

Can we locate the origins of modern political institutions also in Calvinist Protestantism? Some scholars after Weber have asked themselves this question, and, after the fashion of Weber, tried to unravel the Calvinist origins of modern politics. The ideas of the modern nation-state, of citizens’ rights, of democratic procedures and of the republican form of government in the end derive from the same Calvinist ethos that brought forth the capitalist spirit. The emergence of the modern nation-state is the result of more than three centuries of violent political struggle and revolutions, most of which took place in Europe. Revolution was subsequently exported to North America.

Calvinist Protestantism was an important ideological factor in these revolutions. This fact makes the socio-political aspects of Calvinism relevant with regard to anti-colonial struggles and the Indian Freedom struggle in particular. As we will argue in subsequent chapters, Indian modernity and anti-colonial notions partly emerged from a Protestantisation of Hinduism. This Hindu 'Protestantism' (more precisely a novel interpretation of Vedantic texts) provided a mobilising ideology in the late nineteenth century in East India, comparable to Calvinism in North Western Europe in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries.

The Calvinist inspiration behind the radical changes in the English constitution in the seventeenth century is the subject of a well-known study by Michael Walzer (1965). He bases his study on the premise that revolution 'as a political phenomenon and ideology as a kind of *mental and moral discipline* [emphasis added] are both . . . closely related to the rise of the modern state' (Walzer 1965: 1). Like Weber, Walzer believes in the 'power of ideology . . . in its capacity to activate its adherents to change the world' (Walzer 1965: 27). Although a thoroughly religious doctrine, Calvinism as a socio-political ideology 'appropriated worldly means and usages: magistracy, legislation, warfare'. The 'struggle for a new human community, replacing the lost Eden, was made a matter of concrete political activity' (Walzer 1965: 28). The instruments promoted by Calvinist ideologues to accomplish the 'new human community' were the religious discipline of the individual and the family, and the church organisation (cf. Walzer 1965: 27–9). In the Calvinist view, the state was a means to discipline the sinful and rebellious nature of humankind (cf. Walzer 1965: 44–7). Ideally, Calvinist Christians should be organised not only in church-like families but also in a state-like community of believers called a "commonwealth" which, unlike the secular state, 'would be founded upon the consent of conscientious men' (Walzer 1965: 47). Calvinism 'brought conscience and coercion together' (Walzer 1965: 47). Walzer formulates the Calvinistic problematic already noted by Weber thus: 'Calvin was acutely aware of the vast increase in social control that would result if human beings could be made to will that control themselves and to consent to it in their hearts' (Walzer 1965: 47). This problematic points to the question of individual autonomy versus social pressure and collectivism. It seems quite obvious that the full idea of individual autonomy could be derived from the freedom of conscience, but modern collectivism owes much to the alleged consent of conscientious people to live together and collectively submit to a general purpose, be it religious, social or political. The social and political emancipation of a community rests on the personal emancipation of its constituent members.

### Against hierarchy

Traditional society and politics were arranged in the form of hierarchies exemplified among others in the institution of the large manorial feudal



family. In the fifteenth century 'the idea of the cosmos as a hierarchy', the great chain of Being, was 'readily available even to the ordinary mind'. In this chain were found from the top downwards: God, angels, the Blessed Virgin, the saints, the pope, the bishops and finally the king. By contrast Calvin's God 'reigned over a single unified domain'. Hence the chain of Being became irrelevant if not downright idolatrous (cf. Walzer 1965: 152–3). The feudal social order was often compared to a living organism, a body, the mystical body of Christ (cf. Walzer 1965: 171–2).<sup>9</sup> Puritans rejected this body metaphor and its hierarchical implications. Instead they stressed the importance of family life and tried to transform the family into a small church or a Christian commonwealth. The institution of the family was created through voluntary marriage of a couple. All this stood in stark contrast to the idea of the feudal manorial family. The Puritan family, like the Puritan concept of the state, was based on mutual consent and contract, and thus the exact opposite of feudal relationships (cf. Walzer 1965: 188–97). Puritans relentlessly attacked the traditional social relationships understood in organic hierarchical terms. The feudal hierarchy of status and degree, after all, seemed to reflect the idea of the great chain of Being. The Calvinist insistence on God as the sole sovereign of the cosmos did away with the chain of Being. As Calvinism stressed faith and predestination, not rituals, the old ecclesiastical hierarchy was made superfluous in one stroke. By implication the political hierarchy and absolute kingship could be done away with as well, for these would only detract from the absolute and sovereign majesty of God, the only majesty that exists in the cosmos. The implications of these intellectual positions prepared the way for revolution in the modern sense of the complete and violent overthrow of an authoritarian regime that has lost its moral right to governance. Thus Puritanism

made revolution available to the minds of seventeenth-century Englishmen. . . . It trained them to think of the struggle with Satan and his allies as an extension and duplicate of their internal spiritual conflicts, and also as a difficult and continuous war, requiring methodical, organized activity, military exercise, and discipline.

(Walzer 1965: 290)

The Calvinist saints were the first . . . bands of revolutionar[ies] . . . who sought above all control and self-control.

(Walzer 1965: 310)

What is the general model of political radicalism that emerges from English Puritanism? Walzer suggests that what is needed is: (1) a band of chosen 'saints'; (2) they should be marked off from others by extraordinary self-assurance, rigid self-discipline and daring; (3) they confront the existing world 'as if in war'; (4) their organisation reflects the new order they seek – people join them on the basis of impersonal ideological commitment,

abandoning traditional loyalties; (5) they produce a new kind of politics consisting in the progressive realisation of goals, committed activity, experimentation with new political forms; (6) they aim at social reconstruction, their unity being based on ideological zeal outside family ties. Walzer maintains that these prerequisites are even valid for later revolutionary groups such as the Jacobins and the Bolsheviks (cf. Walzer 1965: 317–19). Combining the two pictures of the rise of the spirit of modern capitalism and the Puritan political revolutionary zeal into one, the outlines of Western modernity do indeed seem to appear. The combined picture also shows the force of internalised ideas, convictions and faith whose dissemination required novel material conditions such as the extensive use of the printing press, which greatly facilitated literacy and education.<sup>10</sup>

But is this the whole story? Philip Gorski reconsiders what he calls the Walzer thesis. According to Gorski this thesis amounts to the claim that the English Puritans ‘were mobilized and urged on by a militant and well-organized body of clergymen’ (2002: 78). Gorski slightly disagrees with Walzer and modifies this into ‘Calvinist movements seem to have taken a revolutionary turn only when . . . they (a) had a popular base and (b) faced a Catholic monarch . . . and . . . succeeded . . . only in countries that had strong national parliaments with well-established fiscal powers’ (op. cit.: 79). The Dutch revolt succeeded because the ‘day-to-day administration of the Republic’s affairs was placed in the hands of small, parliamentary committees. . . [and because of] . . . the establishment of a sophisticated system of public finance’ (op. cit.: 88). The adapted Walzer thesis claims that ‘all the *successful* revolutions of the early modern era, from the Dutch Revolt through the English Civil War, were inspired at least partly by Calvinism’. Walzer was the first to recognise ‘the two strands of this connection: the ideology . . . of radical Calvinism and the organization of the Reformed Church, for it was by means of Calvinist ideology and organization that the “masses” . . . were mobilized’. However, the organisation of the masses was not done only by churchmen, but also and more importantly by ‘lawyers, merchants, and even the occasional artisan’ (op. cit.: 103).

### Revolutionary Calvinist inspirations

On what ideological grounds did Calvinists engage in making revolutions? For an engaging analysis we can turn to John Sap’s study of revolutionary Calvinism (2001). Although Sap writes mainly from a legal point of view, he amply reveals the historical impact of the Calvinist monarchomachs on revolutionary socio-political changes. The Greek term ‘monarchomach’ literally means ‘a fighter against monarchy’. The term refers to sixteenth-century Calvinist thinkers who defended the right of resistance to absolute rulers. The most well-known Calvinist monarchomach thinkers were: François Hotman, Theodore Beza, Philippe du Plessis Mornay and John Knox. These thinkers elaborated some of John Calvin’s pronouncements on the rights

and duties of kings and magistrates. In his *Institutes* Calvin devotes the very last chapter to civil government (Book IV, Chapter XX). The keynote of that chapter is: one ought to obey all worldly government, all magistrates and all kings because there is no government that is not willed by God. But towards the end Calvin exclaims:

in that obedience which we hold to be due to the commands of rulers, we must always make the exception, nay, must be particularly careful that it is not incompatible with obedience to Him to whose will the wishes of all kings should be subject, to whose decrees their commands must yield, to whose majesty their sceptres must bow.

(Institutes, Book IV, Chapt. XX, par. 32)

Calvin puts a limit to both obedience and the power of rulers. The people must obey all civil government but only to the extent that this government – essentially the monarch or magistrates – does not break God’s commands or arrogate supreme majesty to itself which is only possessed by God. Absolute monarchs and rulers who disobey God should not be obeyed by the people. Calvin adduces Biblical examples to support the doctrine of limited royal sovereignty. This doctrine should be read in conjunction with Calvin’s doctrine of conscience referred to before. The more complete picture that emerges from Calvin’s writing is as follows: the only genuine sovereignty in the world rests with God, not with humankind. All people, including worldly rulers, have to obey the will of God. This will in general is revealed by the voice of one’s own conscience, and it is revealed in particular detail in the scriptures (which one could consult on one’s own!). The end of government is social usefulness. Citizens are obliged to obey government only to the extent that the ruler obeys, or at least does not infringe upon, God’s sovereign will. People’s consciences tell them how far this obedience should go, especially when the ruler enforces unlawful regulations that hurt conscience and break God’s revealed laws. It is, in sum, the duty of men and women to disobey a godless absolute ruler. The obvious next step is to remove such a ruler and establish a form of government that is more prone to listen to the voice of conscience and to obey God’s institutes. One could already detect popular sovereignty in this doctrine, for conscience is not limited to the ruler but inheres in all people, thus also in all the subjects of the ruler. If the ruler does not listen to the people, they could and should remove the ruler. This in essence is the doctrine of revolution.

Calvin’s follower and secretary François Hotman (1524–90) wrote *Franco-gallia* (first published in 1573), a lengthy tract on government in which he argues from historical precedent the need for elected kingship, a constitutional state and the establishment of a public council (cf. Sap 2001: 35–43). Hotman was opposed to tyranny. In his view tyranny shows the following traits: (1) government against the will of the governed; (2) the

use of foreign bodyguards by the tyrant; (3) government rules in its own interest, not in the interest of the governed (cf. Sap 2001: 39, 62). Also from the perspective of anti-colonial nationalism these three points are valid and have in fact often been made against foreign colonial rule. Every modern freedom movement or national liberation movement would concur with this Hotmanian definition of tyranny. Sap characterises Hotman as follows:

Hotman experienced the Reformation as a new beginning. He felt . . . that only religion could resist rising absolutism and tyranny. . . . His appeal to historical principles, his constitutional approach and his willingness to use conspiracies and violence made him a revolutionary . . . his work . . . would lead to the rationalistic political theories of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, especially to concepts such as the social contract, legal uniformity and individual freedom.

(Sap 2001: 33)

### Thomas Paine and Deism

The historical and ideological link between Calvinism and English Puritanism on the one hand and the French Revolution of 1789 on the other is provided by the writings of Thomas Paine (1737–1809). Paine was born in a Quaker family. Sap points to this fact in Paine's intellectual formation to explain Paine's possible indebtedness to Calvinist ideology, for Quakers were influenced by Calvinism. However, when Paine wrote his famous revolutionary pamphlet *Common Sense* in 1776 his Calvinist and Quaker background had already somewhat faded. In his *Rights of Man* (published in 1791), precious little Protestantism is left in Paine's writing. It is *Rights of Man* that links the American Revolution of 1776 with the French Revolution of 1789, for Paine actively participated in both. *Common Sense* convinced many Americans of the need to sever the bonds with Britain and the British monarch George the Third. In *Rights of Man* Paine defends the French Revolution and the proclamation of the *Rights of Man and the Citizen* by the French revolutionary government against the attacks on the revolution made by Edmund Burke. Sap asserts the ideological proximity between Paine and Hotman (cf. Sap 2001: 191). And again, quoting D. A. Wilson, 'Paine's writings provide an important link in the transmission of English Civil War republican ideology to the radical edge of the American Revolution' (Sap 2001: 193).

The connection between the French Revolution and the American Revolution was not through Thomas Paine only. Paine counselled the French on drafting a constitution. It was Thomas Jefferson who assisted Sièyes and La Fayette in drafting the *Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen* (cf. Sap 2001: 203). Paine's indebtedness to the Calvinist Reformation as well as the distance he travelled away from Calvinism in the narrow sense

can best be seen from a quotation from one of Paine's own writings, *Rights of Man*:

The French constitution hath abolished or renounced *Toleration*, and *Intolerance* also, and hath established Universal Right of Conscience. . . .

Toleration may be viewed in a much stronger light. Man worships not himself, but his Maker; and the liberty of conscience which he claims, is not for the service of himself, but of his God. . . . Toleration . . . places itself, not between man and man, nor between church and church, . . . but between God and man; . . . and by the same act of assumed authority by which it tolerates man to pay his worship, it presumptuously and blasphemously sets itself up to tolerate the Almighty to receive it.

(Thomas Paine Reader: 231)

By putting forward so strongly the *individual* and universal liberty of conscience, Paine showed the direction high modernity was supposed to take. The idea of the freedom of conscience is Calvinistic in origin as we have seen. Paine adopts it, strips it of its Calvinist and Biblical origins and takes it to its ultimate conclusion. Paine's political ideal was the republican form of government based on the 'consent of the governed', his religious ideal was the free conscience of the individual citizen and worship in accordance with this ideal. Paine draws the last consequences out of this Calvinist doctrine and thus defeats the authoritarian character of organised Calvinism itself. To *Rights of Man*, Paine wrote a controversial theological sequel, *The Age of Reason* (1794). In this work Paine pleads for Deism, a religion cleansed of all superstition and belief in the supernatural.<sup>11</sup> Paine's ideas on Deism in *Age of Reason* brings us also close to India, for Paine's Deism bears a striking resemblance to Rammohun Roy's reformation of Hinduism. After all, Paine's Deism and Rammohun's Vedantism centre around a sole Divine ground of the universe. Paine rejects oral and written revelations:

we must necessarily affix the idea . . . of unchangeableness . . . in that which we would honour with the name of the Word of God; and therefore the Word of God cannot exist in any written or human language.

(Thomas Paine Reader: 414)

The true revelation of God is not in words: 'The Word of God is the creation we behold and it is in this word, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man' (Thomas Paine Reader: 419). This 'Scripture' tells us all about God's power, wisdom, unchangeable order, munificence, mercy and abundance (cf. Thomas Paine Reader: 421). The way for man to discover God is 'only by the exercise of reason' (ibid.: 421).

Paine sums up his religious faith in the words with which he begins his argument in the *Age of Reason*:

I believe in one God, and no more; and I hope for happiness beyond this life.

I believe in the equality of man; and I believe that religious duties consist in doing justice, loving mercy, and endeavouring to make our fellow-creatures happy.

(Thomas Paine Reader: 400)

At the end of Part I of the *Age of Reason* Paine sums up his conclusions:

if ever a universal religion should prevail, it will not be by believing anything new, but in getting rid of redundancies and believing as man believed at first. Adam, if ever there were such a man, was created a Deist.

(Thomas Paine Reader: 451)

Three important elements in Paine's Deism can be distinguished: (1) belief in a single God; (2) living a virtuous life while trying to make fellow human beings happy; (3) universal religion is belief in God stripped of all cultural and circumstantial features regarding ethics and mode of worship. Paine was an avowed individualist as he nowhere suggests his fellow Deists should congregate in a church for worship. In fact, the whole of human society has become the place to practise religion by living a virtuous life. Paine's belief in the equality of humankind in this context is evidence of the egalitarian socio-political message of his Deism.

For comparison, I quote a passage from Benjamin Franklin, like Paine a revolutionary and a Deist. Franklin was neither a philosopher nor a theologian. But again like Paine he had a great interest in the natural sciences. One of Franklin's credos which he jotted down for himself in 1731 states:

That there is one God Father of the Universe.

That he [is] infinitely good, Powerful and wise.

That he is omnipresent.

That he ought to be worshipped, by Adoration Prayer and

Thanksgiving both in publick and private.

That he loves such of his Creatures as love and do good to others.

(Benjamin Franklin: 333)

I am referring to Franklin also because, as we have seen, Weber uses a rather long quotation from Franklin's *Advice to a Young Tradesman* to exemplify the Calvinist Puritan ethic of capitalism. It remains a puzzle why Weber quoted Franklin, who was not a Trinitarian Calvinist at all but an avowed

Deist. Franklin did not object to the different Protestant denominations in New England, but did not believe in their doctrines. If both Paine and Franklin are quoted to establish the motivating force of Calvinist Puritan religion (Paine for modern political revolution and Franklin for modern capitalism), one may as well interpret this differently. For instance, both authors show the motivational force of religious freethinking, Unitarianism and abstract Deism.<sup>12</sup> In the eighteenth century these three religious attitudes had become associated in the popular mind with radical modernity, more than the dogmatic doctrines of Calvinism.<sup>13</sup> Weber, of course, could have answered this objection by saying that the ethic of Calvinism had gone into Deism and that this behavioural ethic functioned as a modernising ideology. Thus Calvinist thought ultimately set the engine of individualistic modernity in motion. In the course of its historical journey Calvinism lost most of its doctrinal baggage. The pattern of modernity's mentality we see emerging is not a straight line from Calvinist Puritanism to Enlightenment secularism but a gradual and meandering movement from the complex to simple (perhaps too simple and indeterminate for many) and from elaborate doctrine to simple individualist faith. Thus the spirit of modernity amounts to an individualist ethics based on free private conscience, overcoming the mentality of hierarchy and of authoritarianism.<sup>14</sup> Deism was the ultimate and heretical consequence of the teachings of the Reformation. Personal liberty was not an issue in Calvinism. Deism, especially Paine's Deism, is essentially a celebration of personal liberty and virtuous social living. Killingley remarks about the effects of Deism even in the nineteenth century that its

extreme exponents, for instance Thomas Paine, were violently opposed to organized religion. For this reason, and because of its association in many British minds with the French Revolution, the term tended to have pejorative connotations.

(Killingley 1993: 112)

Some crucial elements of Calvinism have been retained even in this radical idea of Deism: personal and free conscience, strong emphasis on the world as God's creation, cultivation of science on the grounds that it reveals God's glory in nature, rejection of rituals and priesthood. We had referred to Calvin's own doctrine that God has revealed himself to some extent in nature and therefore all humans have some idea of God. This Deist doctrine is already formulated in the *Institutes* quoted earlier (Calvin, *Institutes*, Book I, Chapter V, Paragraph 1). Calvin's idea that God's glory is 'engraven' on the world is repeated and elaborated in Paine's dictum that 'The Word of God is the creation we behold and it is in this word, which no human invention can counterfeit or alter, that God speaketh universally to man' (Thomas Paine Reader: 419). The main difference between Calvin and Paine is the role of the Bible. For Calvin, people need the further revelation of God through his Biblical word, which is precisely the doctrine that Paine rejects.

Calvin's God is the only sovereign next to whom there is no other sovereign in the true sense of the word. On the basis of this doctrine, Calvinists tended to fight absolute monarchy as a blasphemous arrogation of absolute power by a mere man. Radicalising this doctrine in the Painean sense leads to the notion of the equality of all people and the fight against every form of social and political tyranny. Paine's as well as Franklin's doctrine of ethics is very simple: 'do good to others and promote the happiness of others' because this is what the God of the universe is also doing and he wants humankind to do likewise. The basic principle of Paine's Deism is to remove all the superfluities of religious traditions and we are left with the Deist credo. As we will show in the next two chapters, the brief credos of both Paine and Franklin reoccur in the Hindu Unitarian church founded by Rammohun Roy. Roy and his successor Debendranath Tagore could base themselves easily on the indigenous Indian tradition of Vedanta for the latter closely resembles Deism. Thus we can establish an ideological affinity between Calvinism, Deism and 'reformed' Vedantist Hinduism. All three can be shown to have motivated socio-political changes, all three are landmarks on the road to a modernity that aspires to be useful for the whole world.

## Notes

- 1 The ecological critique of capitalism came much later and is not included in the discussion of leftism here.
- 2 See for instance: Scott Lash and Sam Whimster, eds. 1987. *Max Weber, Rationality and Modernity*. London: Allen and Unwin; Hartmut Lehmann and Jean Martin Ouedraogo, eds. 2003. *Max Webers Religionssoziologie in interkultureller Perspektive*. Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht; Wolfgang Schluchter and Friederich Wilhelm Graf, eds. 2005. *Asketischer Protestantismus und der 'Geist' des Modernen Kapitalismus*. Tübingen: Mohr Siebeck. And the new translation into English of Weber's 1905 version of the Protestant ethic: Max Weber. 2002. *The Protestant Ethic and the 'Spirit' of Capitalism and Other Writings by Max Weber*. Edited, translated and with an Introduction by Peter Baehr and Gordon C. Wells. London: Penguin Books.
- 3 Unless otherwise indicated, I am throughout referring to Weber (2001), a new reprint of the 1930 edition of Talcott Parson's English translation.
- 4 Weber, *The Protestant Ethic*, p. 27.
- 5 Op. cit.: 14–16. I have abbreviated these maxims and left out a lot. Weber quotes a large piece from Franklin's 'Advice to a Young Tradesman'.
- 6 This point is stressed by Weber again and again (Weber, *Protestant Ethic*, pp. 48–50, 139). But also Karl Marx had a high opinion of human agency. See Prakash Karat, ed. 2001. *A World to Win*, the essay by Irfan Habib, pp. 49–50. Habib shows that Marx was not a materialist determinist. Thus agency and will were important. A similar point is made by Ahmad, pp. 42–3.
- 7 On sanctification of the world see, for instance, the great summary of modern Dutch Calvinist theology by Dr. H. Berkh. 1990. *Christelijk Geloof* (Christian Faith). Nijkerk: G.F. Callenbach, 1990, pp. 494–8. A more recent work is G. van den Brink and C. van der Kooi. 2012. *Christelijke dogmatiek: een inleiding* (Christian systematic theology, an introduction). Zoetermeer: Uitgeverij Boeken-centrum, pp. 611–13.



- 8 Edmund Leites in his volume on conscience and casuistry in early modern Europe claims that the idea of the freedom of conscience emerged gradually as a practice in Europe and did not all of a sudden come fully upon the scene due to the Reformation (1988: 11). Conscience in other world-religions is the theme of the volume edited by Amaladass (1999). But this book only proves how little the doctrine of conscience has been theorised in, for instance, modern Hindu thought. See for example p. 38. Even nowadays the Protestant doctrine of conscience attracts theological attention as may be seen from the study by John C. Staten. 1988. *Conscience and the Reality of God: An Essay on the Experiential Foundations of Religious Knowledge*. Berlin, New York and Amsterdam: Mouton de Gruyter. Staten discusses among others the theology of Gerhard Ebeling and Bultmann.
- 9 This reminds us of the ancient Hindu model of the sacred social order: the cosmic man (*purusha*) whose head is the Brahmins (priests), whose arms are the Kshatriyas (warriors), whose thighs are the Vaishyas (farmers and traders) and whose feet are the Shudras (servants and slaves). This model is first described in Rig Veda, book 10, hymn 90.
- 10 Benedict Anderson famously called this phenomenon 'print-capitalism' (1993: 39–40).
- 11 Paine did not invent Deism. The first references to Deism go back to the times of Calvin. Deism was especially popular in England in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. It originated with Lord Herbert of Cherbury (1583–1648) who upheld the idea that God had implanted in the human mind a disposition to believe in a supreme Being. One should worship this Being through piety and virtue in order to reap a good reward in the life to come. Among later Deists were Matthew Tindal (1657–1730) and even John Locke. The great American revolutionaries Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson were Deists. The original Deist idea formulated by Cherbury runs parallel to the doctrine of conscience, for conscience, according to Paul (Rom 2: 14–15), resides in all human beings.
- 12 Unitarianism in the eighteenth century was still distinguishable from the kind of radical Deism Paine espoused. The former retained the authority of the Bible as a source of inspiration while rejecting the doctrine of the Trinity. Unitarianism had already been combated in the sixteenth century by John Calvin when the Unitarian humanist Michael Servetus sought refuge in Geneva from the persecution of the Inquisition. In Geneva he was burned at the stake for the same heresy, namely Unitarianism.
- 13 The most comprehensive description of radical modernity or radical enlightenment is of course Jonathan Israel's 2001. *Radical Enlightenment: Philosophy and the Making of Modernity 1650–1750*. New York: Oxford University Press. Israel traces the radical enlightenment back to Spinoza.
- 14 This chapter moves perhaps too quickly by leaving out the crucial period of the late seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century which witnessed the rise of what Jonathan Israel calls the Radical Enlightenment. The major protagonist and prime instigator of this movement was, according to Israel, the Dutch Jewish philosopher Benedict de Spinoza (1632–77); cf. Israel (2001).

### 3 The beginning of the Hindu reformation

Rammohun Roy

The foregoing sketch of the mentality of Western modernity, drawn in rough outline from the Calvinist Reformation to late eighteenth-century radical Deism, is necessarily impressionistic and incomplete. Only a few brush strokes could be given in order to create the vague semblance of an image. The sketch is meant to indicate some major trends that have gone into the making of Western modernity up to the time when it encounters – or better, forces itself on – Indian civilisation. This ‘encounter’ was the result of British colonialism. The British had been in Bengal since the middle of the seventeenth century as merchants. Bengal became the British bridge-head into the rest of the Indian Subcontinent.<sup>1</sup> From Calcutta in the early nineteenth century, British political, economic and cultural influence radiated out into the hinterland. Calcutta was not the only British-dominated metropolis. There were Bombay in the West and Madras in the South of the Subcontinent. But Calcutta was destined to become the imperial hub. After the battle of Plassy in 1757, the British gained full economic control to be gradually but steadily followed by complete political dominance. In 1765 the East India Company based in Calcutta formally accepted from the Mughal emperor Shah Alam the right to collect taxes in Bengal. First the British had ensured that the Mughal governor of Bengal lost all independence. Consequently they assumed the financial administration of Bengal, Bihar and Orissa (Marshall 1987: 89–90). This made the East India Company into a de facto government of the Bengal presidency. Within half a century after the assumption of the right to collect taxes, the British brought large parts of the Subcontinent under their influence, either by direct rule or indirectly through the princely states which enjoyed a surrogate sovereignty under British supervision and scrutiny.

For the history of mentalities the colonial presence posits an interesting and very crucial problematic: a seemingly emancipatory Western modernity in Great Britain turns into its opposite in a faraway non-Western region such as India. Western modernity outside the West tended to oppress rather than emancipate. This fact provoked sensitive Hindu intellectuals into creating their own indigenous versions of modernity, but this modernity is attacked by British modernity because the former is seen as an aberration.

However, the emancipatory tendencies of Western modernity were enthusiastically embraced by the very same people who were dominated by Western modernity.

The West came to India as coloniser as well as bearer of modernity. This *mission civilisatrice* was laden with ambiguity and contradictions. Obviously, emancipatory and individualistic traits of Western modernity clashed here, especially in India, with the exigencies of Empire. Early nineteenth-century Bengal witnessed the first intense and ambiguous meeting between a two-headed Western modernity and an indigenous self-conscious non-Western civilisation. The meeting produced a peculiar form of Hindu modernity and in the long run a serious challenge to Western colonial interventionism. But this was not obvious to the first generations of Hindu intellectuals who engaged the West on its own ideological ground.

### Rammohun Roy as Hindu moderniser

There is no doubt that the life and work of Rammohun Roy (1774?–1833) marked an important turning point in Indian cultural, social and political history. The acme of his career as a religious reformer and propagandist of social reforms in upper-caste Hindu society coincided with the consolidation of British power in the Subcontinent during the first decades of the nineteenth century. Since the 1970s, evaluations of Rammohun by prominent Indian historians and social scientists are on the whole quite critical.<sup>2</sup> Internationally acclaimed and influential representatives of the Subaltern Studies school of historiography like Partha Chatterjee do not refer to Rammohun in hagiographical tones.<sup>3</sup> In his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World* (first published in 1986) Chatterjee repeats the quasi-hagiographical view of Rammohun as ‘the first great “modernizer” and father of the 19th century “renaissance” in Indian thought’ (Chatterjee 1993: 23). The quotation marks around modernizer and renaissance indicate that for later social theorists such as Chatterjee, Rammohun can no longer be regarded as a truly effective moderniser, nor that there was a genuine renaissance in Bengal. On the next page Chatterjee adds:

As facts stand, Rammohun Roy’s break with tradition was ‘deeply contradictory’, accommodating within the same corpus of thinking numerous compromises with orthodox, Hindu elitist and, by his own enlightened standards, clearly irrational ways of thought and practice, and in any case it was a break only on the intellectual plane and not at the level of basic social transformation . . . the achievements of . . . ‘modernizers’ such as Rammohun seemed limited within a Hindu-elitist, colonial, almost comprador, framework.

(Chatterjee 1993: 24)

This neatly sums up the changed views on Rammohun from the adulation of the 1950s to the critical assessment of Rammohun in the 1970s. It is

certainly correct that Rammohun's achievements must be seen within the confines of a 'Hindu elitist, colonial . . . framework'. It is also true that Rammohun's activities were limited to the 'intellectual plane', as will become clear later in this chapter. That Rammohun did not accomplish any 'basic social transformation' does not seem to be right, as will also become clear later on in this chapter. And yet Chatterjee's remark shows the uneasiness Indian social theorists feel about Rammohun's Hindu reforms. As we will demonstrate, the idea that Rammohun was 'the father of the 19th century "renaissance" in Indian thought', should indeed be discarded. The term renaissance is misleading and incorrect. Rammohun was certainly the father of something, but not of a renaissance of Indian thought. Rather he was the father of a Hindu Vedantic reformation which ideologically did influence – and to a degree determined – subsequent developments in Hindu thinking, philosophically and theologically.

It may be true that Rammohun was a 'comprador' when he cooperated with the East India Company, but he was also the earliest champion in colonial India of the freedom of the press.<sup>4</sup> One could perhaps call him naive when he believed in the benignity of the British domination. It will be necessary to assess Rammohun's achievements as a Hindu protagonist of modernity soberly and on the basis of what he tried to accomplish through his Vedantic religious reform movement.

In his study on Indian nationalism and nation-formation, the sociologist G. Aloysius regards Rammohun as one of the Hindu exclusivist nationalists. In a footnote he comments:

Devotees of Rajaram M.Roy [i.e. Raja Rammohun Roy], Bankim, and others, are pained that these stalwarts are arraigned for conduct that was considered praiseworthy in their time, and believe they should not be judged in the light of today's understanding of egalitarianism. The effort in this study has been to show that egalitarian consciousness was very much there during the colonial period . . . and evaluation of the cultural nationalists [among whom apparently Rammohun] is certainly by their contemporary political nationalists and not by reading back today's conceptions into history.

(Aloysius 1998: 144)

Apart from the fact that Aloysius does not prove his point on egalitarianism, there is also no evidence of evaluations of Rammohun by 'contemporary political nationalists' to the effect that he was not egalitarian enough. To the contrary, there was a barrage of slander against Rammohun by orthodox Hindus, but these Aloysius cannot reinterpret as egalitarian critics of Rammohun. The main point Aloysius wants to make is that Rammohun, along with other Hindu 'cultural nationalists', should be criticised for having propagated their 'Brahminical' version of Indian culture. This is a critique based on contemporary political and social issues, for instance the question to what extent present-day Indian society should be free from

Brahminical (read Hindu revivalist) dominance. These issues in a way interfere with a balanced evaluation. Historical and social scientific analysis is still coloured by numerous contemporary political and social frustrations. Chatterjee rightly observes that in the popular perception Rammohun is only associated with the abolition of burning widows alive on the pyre of their husband. This practice was called suttee, derived from the Sanskrit *satī*, 'virtuous woman'. This fact veils to some extent Rammohun's other achievements as the first modern Hindu Vedantist reformer, theologian and philosopher.

Bruce Robertson devotes a book-length study to Rammohun's religious and philosophical background in Vedanta, especially Advaita Vedanta (1999). Robertson evaluates Rammohun's Upanishadic/Vedantic 'Hindu' reformation very positively:

The more carefully Ray is read, the more important he becomes. All his other writings and campaigns for reform come into sharper focus when examined within the context of his vedanta doctrines. Without this context, Rammohun's social, educational and political activities have become easily confused with those of missionaries and other European reformers. . . . By founding his social reform upon his existential interpretation of vedanta sastra Rammohun Ray revived for his contemporaries an old model of defence against the encroachment of overpowering foreign theological and cultural systems. After Rammohun Indians could challenge one another with a Hindu scriptural, cultural and institutional basis for national revitalization.

(Robertson 1999: 176)

In Robertson's view Rammohun has been grossly misunderstood, both by his admirers and his (present-day) detractors because most interpreters of Rammohun's legacy have relied exclusively on the latter's English writings, ignoring his Bengali writings on Vedanta (cf. Robertson 1999: 165–7). Robertson is the only author who recognises liberal political principles in Rammohun's understanding of Vedanta, thus making Rammohun the earliest exponent of what towards the end of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century was called 'political Vedantism'. The revitalisation that Robertson mentions may be misleading, for it suggests that Rammohun was a conservative Hindu revivalist of sorts. This is not borne out by what is known about Rammohun's intentions:

Rammohan Ray today is called the Father of Modern India . . . [he] set the agenda for modern India. He envisioned a self-governing modern state under one rule of law, proudly taking its place among the most prosperous and enlightened nations of the world. Rammohan Ray's vision was of a nation, a society founded upon the Upanishadic principles of one rule of law for everyone in society, and freedom of

sadhana . . . his enormous contribution to modern Indian sectarian dialogue, where we see his greatest originality, is sadly forgotten.

(Robertson 1999: 181)

As we will discuss further down, the 'Upanishadic principles of one rule of law' and 'freedom of sadhana' refer to the sphere of individualistic inner world-renunciation.<sup>5</sup> This is the sphere of Indian individualist modernity. Rammohun's 'sectarian dialogue' signifies the fact that he knew well and wrote about Islam as well as Protestant Christianity. Rammohun was the first modern Hindu to respectfully criticise the outward ritual aspects of all world-religions and try to find their underlying spiritual unity. This will become clear in the rest of this chapter.

The beginning of Western individualism and modernity is often located in the eighteenth-century Enlightenment. But we have already indicated that it goes further back to the Reformation. The Indian 'Reformation' initiated by Rammohun covers a very small period of no more than 50 years and is more a Vedantic innovation than a broad Reformation. But already in nineteenth-century India some observers regarded Rammohun's movement, the Brahmo Samaj, as the equivalent to the Western Reformation (see Hatcher 2001: 144). About the nineteenth-century Indian renaissance Bipan Chandra observes:

Not so much the Hindu middle classes as the modern intelligentsia was basically secular and democratic. Herein lies the significance of the nineteenth-century renaissance and the twentieth-century socialist movement. With all their weaknesses, the two guaranteed that from Raja Rammohan Roy to Jawaharlal Nehru the intellectually and politically hegemonic intelligentsia . . . would be among Hindus and Parsis secular, rationalistic and democratic.

(Chandra 2000: 191–2)

Bipan Chandra identifies Rammohun with the democratic and even socialist tendencies within modern Indian culture. It appears that Chandra comes closest to associating Rammohun with emancipatory modernity without being overly embarrassed about the latter's Brahminical background. It hardly needs mentioning that Rammohun's times witnessed the rapid spread of the printed word in India both in English, Bengali and other Indian languages. Nor that the Christian/Evangelical missionaries were often engaged in fierce criticism of the public practices of Hinduism such as widow-burning, and the worship of images of the Hindu Gods and Goddesses. The latter practice was simply designated as idolatry. It is also common knowledge that Rammohun took this criticism seriously and strove to combat it by denouncing idolatry. To understand Rammohun's role as a Hindu reformer it is not necessary to repeat the well known and the obvious. The foundation of his reformation we have to find in two areas: his theological ideas laid

down in his writings, and his organisational talent resulting in the Hindu church of the Brahmo Samaj.

Western Protestant reformers thought they could return to the original purity and simplicity of the first centuries of Christendom. Similarly, it appears that Rammohun wished to go back to the purity of original Vedic/Vedantic Hinduism. It is interesting to note that in both cases, the reformers created something quite unprecedented on the basis of this principle of return to original textual sources. They believed that the fundamental message of the ancient scriptures was not affected by the contingencies of time and place. But neither the Protestant reformers nor Rammohun intended to propagate an entirely new faith. They imagined they were restoring the eternal verities of their respective scriptural traditions. In this context we will not question or debate whether Rammohun has actually succeeded in returning to original Hinduism. What we must do here is to show the long-term socio-political effects of his theological intervention. Nor do we discuss whether his understanding of Hinduism as based on Vedantic scriptures is wrong, elitist, Brahminically biased, objectionable, etc. For we are not interested here in the question of what Hinduism is, but in what Rammohun understood to be true Hinduism and how his understanding of Hinduism affected Hindu and therefore Indian modernity.

### **World-renunciation in traditional Hinduism**

Rammohun's Vedantist reformation can only be properly assessed against the backdrop of the sociology of Hinduism. We mentioned this in Chapter 1 but will now explore this issue in greater detail. The Hindu socio-religious model that has been internalised by many over a long period of time provides the Hindu cultural context to Rammohun's modernity. For although Rammohun intended to modernise the whole of traditional Hindu society, his interventions were mostly picked up by urbanised middle- and upper-class Hindus only. The social system of traditional Hinduism is closely linked to feudalism (the reign of big landlords) and the aristocracy (Brahmins were the house-priests of Hindu royal families). Both traditions are based on the idea of organic social hierarchy. In the case of Hinduism we find the (largely idealised) social system of the four *varṇas* and the actually existing bewildering multiplicity of castes (*jātis*). The latter is primarily characterised by commensality, connubium and rules of ritual purity.<sup>6</sup>

Hierarchy and power relations in Hinduism are located in the realm of worldly social life, *samsāra*. This is the realm of violence and power struggles, a realm over which Brahminical ritual hegemony always sought to gain and maintain control. This is also the realm of complementary castes, their hierarchical order being based on their greater ritual purity or impurity. The complementary system of pure and impure and the interminable chain of conflicts constitute the social order, an order not regulated by

outside transcendental sources of divinely revealed laws (such as the Bible in Christianity). The regulations of the Hindu social order come from the elusive *dharma*, both cosmic and social order and the immanent source of sacred authority whose true content always remains somewhat hidden. For unlike the Christian idea of a transcendental revealed moral code, the sources of *dharma* as group-duties are manifold, ranging from the transcendence of the Vedas to the practices of the learned priestly specialists in the Veda (i.e. the Brahmins who are the intellectual architects of the Hindu sacred social order).<sup>7</sup> It is precisely because *dharma* cannot be codified for all times in a single written code that the British attempt to translate *dharma* by 'law' still confuses the public nowadays. Probably the worst confusions arise from rendering *dharma* by 'religion' in the Western Christian sense. The Western idea of religion is associated with a (often divinely) revealed system of precise and universally binding moral rules and doctrines. *Dharma* is elusive, has to be found, is often local. Even in the sphere of world-renunciation, *dharma* is not a universally standardised code of practice, since every renouncer can and does enunciate his or her own version of *dharma*. In any case, *dharma* surely exists in written form with the status of respectable counsel, but no single code or text wields exclusive authority. One could perhaps somewhat simplistically maintain that Christianity, Islam and Judaism originate from a sacred book, whereas Hinduism gives birth to many social and ritual practices and also to books that are sacred to certain limited groups or sacred in certain social contexts. In the Abrahamic religions the sacred canon is limited in size, textually fixed and of transcendent origin; in Hinduism the sacred canon is unlimited (and unlimitable) in textual form, is immanent and must steadily be discovered and rediscovered. The Hindu canon, the *dharma* per se, has never been finally written down; it is ultimately non-verbal; it is like a state of mind in which the numinous order of the cosmos is immediately experienced. This idea is as old as the Vedas. The Vedic poets were supposed to have seen immediately the cosmic order, *rita*, the Vedic precursor of *dharma* (cf. Fernhout 1994: 29–31, 65–6). In its written form, as a written canon, also the Veda was never fixed (op. cit.: 83).

The Brahmin is the source and carrier of parts of the written Vedic *dharma*. The Brahmin manipulates the numinous *dharma* through (Vedic) rituals in order to maintain the health of the sacred social body-politic, in other words, the ritual purity within the sacred social order. But the world-renouncer stands as it were within the *dharma* itself and hence need not bother anymore about the specifics of the Hindu socio-ritual order. The latter is seen as a reflection of the cosmic order after creation. The world-renouncer, as it were, returns to the undivided world of pre-creation, the realm in which the *dharma* originally rested and from which it evolved into the social order of varna and castes.<sup>8</sup>

World-renunciation brings us to a central issue in Hinduism since late Vedic times. Religious beliefs (in the Western and Islamic sense of the word)



and spiritual salvation (*mukti*, *moksha*) lie outside the worldly sphere, i.e. outside *samsara*. The world of interdependent castes, caste-duties and ritual obligations and the social order has to be abandoned in order to strive for salvation. Although salvation is interpreted as freedom from continuous rebirth and the chain of good and bad deeds (*karma*) and their fruits, in fact this sphere of salvation is nothing but the psychological abandonment of the ritual-social order. The renouncer becomes one – as it were – with the source of *dharma* and therefore a source of *dharma* him- or herself. It is not surprising to find that *dharma* is also the term the Buddha (the ‘Awakened One’, a world-famous Indian world-renouncer) chose to designate the realm of awakening (*bodhi*) from which he enunciated his teachings which are therefore also named *dharma*.<sup>9</sup>

### Varieties of world-renunciation

Renunciation is the source whence emerge Indian ideals of religious renewal, mysticism, asceticism, self-realisation and freedom from social conventions. World-renunciation means opting out of the social world bound by mutual moral and ritual obligations (the famous Hindu, Buddhist and Jaina law of moral retribution, the chain of *karma*). The value of world-renunciation – whether as factual opting out or as inner psychological renunciation – was an important motivation behind many ancient Indian philosophical systems, such as Buddhism, Jainism and the Brahminical schools of Vedanta, Yoga, Sankhya, Vaisheshika and Nyaya; but renunciation also inspired the mystical devotional cults of *bhakti* in medieval times.<sup>10</sup> We could divide world-renunciation in three: (1) complete renunciation by becoming a wandering solitary *sādhu*; (2) renunciation by becoming a monk, *bhikṣu* in a monastic institution such as the Buddhist *saṅgha* and the Brahminical *ashrama*; and (3) the inner renunciation of the world, an inner stepping aside while continuing to live in the social world. These three forms can also be distinguished as spatial/physical and visible distance to the social order as in the case of the solitary renouncer, and less distant to the social world for those who live in monastic communities. At the other end of the spectrum we find the inner, invisible psychological distance to the social order, the psychological distance maintained by the inner renouncer. Complete renunciators and monks are recognisable as renunciators because of their special dress or lack of any dress. Internal renunciators are ordinary people performing their caste-duties within the Hindu social order.

The concept of inner renunciation is given its classical shape in the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita about *karma yoga* and *bhakti*, ‘disinterested performance of worldly duties’ and ‘personal devotion to God’, respectively. Devotion is thus the commonly practised form of inner renunciation. Devotion, *bhakti*, almost replaces renunciation while offering the same advantages as formal renunciation: i.e. total freedom from the obligations that

the sacred social hierarchy lays upon the individual. Hardy thinks the term *bhakti* in the Bhagavad Gita should be rendered with 'loyalty', 'fondness for' (1983: 25–6). Only in later times, *bhakti* acquired a strong emotional meaning. In the Gita *bhakti* thus means something like 'concentrating all one's mental faculties on' Krishna (Hardy 1983: 27). Like his teacher R. C. Zaehner, Hardy calls this state of mind 'intellectual' and 'non-emotional' (op. cit.: 27). This seems somewhat odd. The development of *bhakti* from 'loyalty' to 'intense passionate love' is not improbable. The latter is obviously an intensification of the former basic meaning. Why the former should be non-emotional and intellectual remains a mystery. All one can see is the intensification, deepening and widening of the idea of *bhakti*. But the development ought to have had a plausible basis and this is found in the emotion of 'loyalty' and 'liking', both of them meanings already attributed to *bhakti* by Hardy himself.

The Bhagavad Gita, through its doctrine of inner relinquishing (*tyāga*) and doing one's social duties while being unattached to their fruits, unites the worldly sphere with the sphere of complete renunciation. A few passages from the text itself may illustrate this. The first verse of chapter 18 equates the term *sannyāsa*, renunciation, with *tyāga*, relinquishment. The next verse states:

Sages understand renunciation (*san-nyāsa*) to be the throwing down (*nyāsa*) of acts that are prompted by desire. The learned call the relinquishment of all the fruits of action, [true] relinquishment.<sup>11</sup>

(Bhagavad Gita 18: 2)

Furthermore:

Embodied creatures cannot completely relinquish acts. He who relinquishes the fruits of action is understood to be the real relinquisher (*tyāgin*).

(Bhagavad Gita 18: 11)

How *bhakti* can replace formal outward renunciation (*sannyāsa*) through inner renunciation and bring the same rewards as outward renunciation, is stated in the following verses:

Son of Kunti! Whatever you do, whatever you eat, whatever you pour as sacrificial oblation, whatever you give away as gift, whatever asceticism you practice, do all that as an offering to Me;

in this way you will be released from the bonds of action whose fruits are auspicious or inauspicious. When you have disciplined your inner being by the spiritual discipline consisting in renunciation, you are free and you will reach Me.

(Bhagavad Gita 9: 27–8)

The daily practice of inner renunciation cum mystical devotion to God is described in the last verse of chapter 9:

Fix your mind on Me, be My devotee (*bhakta*), sacrifice to Me, and do obeisance to Me; when you discipline yourself in this way and have Me as your goal, you will reach Me.

(Bhagavad Gita 9: 34)

We will return to the Bhagavad Gita at a later stage. In this context it is sufficient to outline the theory of inner renunciation, interpreted as relinquishment while remaining in the social world, and devotion to God. This forms the substance of the spiritual discipline that the inner renouncer can practise to reach the Divine. Where Upanishadic Vedanta stressed knowledge and self-realisation, the Bhagavad Gita adds the emotional surge of the heart to this spiritual repertoire. It is devotion, *bhakti*, that since the middle ages has been increasingly developed.<sup>12</sup> Refined with literary motives and aesthetics and using all the visual and performing arts, *bhakti*, from an emotional approach to the Divine, became the main bearer of Hinduism, whereas the classical philosophical systems gradually faded out or became the exclusive prerogative of Brahmins. Medieval popular Hinduism was *bhakti*-based. In nineteenth-century Indian nationalism, *bhakti* again played a prominent role.

### World-renunciation and modernity

The importance of world-renunciation and the philosophical systems for Indian modernity cannot be underestimated. The sphere of renunciation constitutes the realm of individualism, personal autonomy and self-development and a personal morality not based on the duties of caste and class.<sup>13</sup> Or in the words of Dumont: 'the renouncer . . . leaves his social role in order to adopt a role that is both universal and personal' (1980: 185). Hence, the remarkable doctrine found in many Upanishads to the effect that he or she who realises the Self becomes *brahman*, and thus realises the Self of the whole world. The renouncer is not defined anymore by his or her limited social self, but now finds the true personality, endless and unencumbered by ritual and social limitations. The renouncer finds his or her individuality only fully in the universal (psychological) space of renunciation (of the social order). In the sphere of renunciation, the renouncer is autonomous, literally so, because he or she blends with the *dharma* and becomes a law unto himself or herself.<sup>14</sup> And yet, universality, individualism and autonomy are precisely the values we have already noted as the core values of Western modernity. In an important essay, Heesterman long ago hinted at the intrinsic similarities between world-renunciation on the one hand, and Indian modernity on the other:

modernity is, if anything, dedicated to the devaluing or even the breaking up of organic or primordial ties, which it wants to replace with

suprapersonal, universalistic groupings . . . this tendency is at the heart of . . . brahminic independence.

(Heesterman 1985: 15)

What we may question in this context is Heesterman's exclusive emphasis on Brahminical world-renunciation. Heesterman believes world-renunciation stems directly from, and is a logical outcome of, Brahminical Vedic tradition. But this matter need not be discussed in this context. That the individual single person fully comes into his or her own in the sphere of renunciation is a theme commonly found in the relevant texts. Vedantic treatises figure prominently among these. The main subject matter of the Vedānta is *ātman*, the Self, and *brahman*, the Divine ground of the universe. The multifaceted theology of the *ātman* expounded in the Upanishads and Vedantic treatises culminates in the spiritual realisation of the Self. This 'self-realisation' seems to imply the full development of the human personality. It is often called ultimate emancipation (*moksha*) from the bonds of social obligations or *karma*. It is these ideas that made Vedānta in the eyes of early nineteenth-century Indian intellectuals headed by Rammohun into such an eminent vehicle of indigenous modernity. Since this realisation has to be done on one's own without the help of priests, and outside the traditional hierarchies, Vedānta seemed to be the Indian counterpart of Western-reformed Christianity. This idea was only strengthened when the devotional Vedānta of the Bhagavad Gita was also brought into play.

In order to show the remarkable similarities between Vedantic ideology and modernity, I will quote some relevant passages. That the Self-realiser transcends worldly social conventions is repeated with some emphasis in the Ashtavakra Gita, also called Ashtavakra Samhita. This is a well-known, though not high classical, source-text of Advaita Vedānta (the Vedānta based on the idea of non-duality):

Being here [in the world], one should realise this: 'when will things done and not done become irrelevant? When will the dualities [of worldly life] become irrelevant? and for whom will they become irrelevant?' As a result of indifference [to worldly distinctions] one should be fully intent on relinquishing (*tyāga*) and leave aside specific resolves (*vratas*) [for the attainment of worldly goals].

(Ashtavakra Samhita, chapter IX: 1)

When a person has observed the different views of great seers (*maharṣi*), holy men (*sādhū*) and yogis; would he not feel indifference and only then attain peace?

Is he not the [real] guru (spiritual master) who has fully realised the true nature of Pure Consciousness through indifference, equality and reasoning, and who has [consequently] saved himself from the [cyclical social] world (*samsṛti*)?

(IX: 5–6)<sup>15</sup>

Four significant details stand out in this passage: (1) indifference (*nirveda*) to *saṃsṛti* (= *saṃsāra*), i.e. the hierarchical fragmented social world; (2) renunciation of traditional social obligations; (3) individualism and individual autonomy; (4) realisation of the true universal personality through (a) indifference to worldly distinctions, (b) a sense of sameness or equality (*saṃatā*) pervading all life-forms, (c) reasoning (*yukti*) or rationality. The similarities with a modern ethos cannot but be striking. The greatest difference with modernity is the fact that this text places its modernity squarely outside the hierarchical social order and does not have the intention to change this order.<sup>16</sup> As the Hindu social order is seen as a natural organic one, it would be pointless for traditional world-renouncers to wish to change what is the natural order of the cosmos. The concept of universal ethics that could be followed by every religious person is not alien to Hinduism. Even if the total renouncer stands outside the social order, the inner renouncer can live within it. The inner renouncer is not only a devotee but also a religious disciplinarian (*yogin*), a person who voluntarily follows a spiritual discipline (*yoga*). The first steps on the road towards salvation via spiritual discipline (often practised while staying within the social order) include universal moral restrictions which transcend the specificity of caste and *varṇa* obligations. It is not without significance that the Bhagavad Gita is regarded as a treatise on various forms of *yoga*. Indeed the text itself describes many varieties of what it calls *yoga*.

The Yoga Sūtra enumerates some general moral qualities, *yama*, 'restrictions', with which the eightfold practice of spiritual discipline, *yoga*, begins.<sup>17</sup> These *yamas* comprise universal moral values. Its universality is actually the fact that the individual person must practise them *as an individual*, not as an organic member of caste or class:

*Yama* (restriction) entails: non-violence, truthfulness, abstention from stealing, chastity, and absence of possessiveness.

These form a great resolve. They are universal (*sārvabhauma*); they are not bounded by caste (*jāti*), place, time or special occasion.

(Yoga Sūtra 2: 30–1, 243–9)

The idea of universal values appears to be not only much older than say the eighteenth century, but also not restricted to European culture. The difference with Europe is that Hindu universality inheres in the person as (Brahminising) renouncer, not as a member of society. Western egalitarianism has brought the ethos of the renouncer in the heart of the old social order to blow it up and replace it by non-hierarchical, horizontal groupings of (in principle) equivalent individuals. As we will see, the great challenge for Hindu modernity was and is to effect a similar total blowing to pieces of the old social order and replace it with the egalitarian individualistic universalism of world-renunciation.

The mentality that emerges from the Yoga Sūtra belongs to the sphere of the inner world-renunciation, the realm of religious virtuosi, ascetics and saints. Although an exact dating of the Yoga Sūtra is difficult, the text is certainly ancient, at least from around the fifth century CE if not earlier. The point here is not the exact dating but the fact that many Sanskrit texts pre-date Islamic and European expansion in the Subcontinent. Thus they encapsulate the ethos of Indian civilisation of an early period.<sup>18</sup> They are only quoted here to give an idea of the ethos contained in some texts associated broadly with the teaching of Vedānta which includes the practice of yoga (as is clear from some later Upanishads in verse and the Bhagavad Gita). Rammohun himself, true to say, never referred to these two particular texts.

### **Rammohun's reformation**

We had indicated before that Rammohun's Hindu/Vedantic reformation and innovation has to be analysed in respect of two areas: (1) theological writings, (2) organisation. The first area determines the ideology, the conceptual content, of this reformation; the second area reveals the social (and ultimately the political) impact of this ideology. In both areas Rammohun appears to have stayed within the Hindu sociological paradigms outlined earlier. We may note that Dumont had interpreted the Indian concept of sect – to which Rammohun's movement, the Brahmo Samaj, bears resemblance – as a 'religious grouping constituted primarily by renouncers, initiates of the same discipline of salvation, and secondarily by their lay sympathizers . . . for the man-in-the-world adherence to a sect is an individual matter' (Dumont 1980: 187). Moreover, the sect 'holds to one doctrine' and often 'is monotheist in the true sense' (Dumont 1980: 284). These two qualifications are only relevant in the case of *bhakti* sects adhering to some form of Vedantic theology. For Rammohun's movement these characteristics are also correct. About Rammohun Dumont remarks (perhaps not entirely correctly): 'Ram Mohan Roy expressed the awakening of religion to politico-social awareness as a sannyasi returning to the world' (Dumont 1980: 236). From a doctrinal and institutional perspective, the Hindu sect must be the best candidate for promoting something like Indian modernity, more particularly the sect that combines loyalty (*bhakti*) with the Vedānta-theology of personal self-realisation. At least it is in the sect of the type of Rammohun's that its first stirrings can be detected. An effective ideology of Hindu modernity must be characterised by: individualism (individual self-realisation); collectivism (group- or national self-realisation); and nationwide emotional appeal (triggered by *bhakti* and narratives of liberation).

### **Doctrinal aspects**

Rammohun was born in a family of learned Brahmins. The Roys were worshippers of Vishnu. As for several generations they had held important

positions under the Nawabs of Bengal, Rammohun was educated in Persian, Arabic as well as Sanskrit.<sup>19</sup> Thus he was well-acquainted with Islamic and Brahminical theology and philosophy. Especially the Vedanta of the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutra and Shankara's commentaries on these texts had his greatest sympathy and interest. Rammohun regarded them as the main sources of Hinduism. But the Vedanta itself was in Rammohun's opinion a summary of the pristine source of Hinduism, i.e. the Vedas. In the introduction to his *Abridgement of the Vedant* (published in 1815), he states this as follows:

The whole body of the Hindoo Theology, Law, and Literature, is contained in the Vedas. . . . These works are extremely voluminous.

(Rammohun Roy, *The English Works* II: 59)

In the introduction to his translation of the Kena Upanishad (1823), Rammohun repeats this idea:

The Veda from which all Hindoo literature is derived, is, in the opinion of the Hindoos, an inspired work.

(Rammohun Roy, *English Works* II: 14)

All of this Vedic literature culminates in the Vedanta, i.e. the Upanishads and the Brahma Sutra attributed to Vyasa. It is the religious system of the Vedanta which Rammohun wishes to widely disseminate among his fellow countrymen identifying them consistently as 'Hindoos':

The Vedanta . . . has continued to be most highly revered by all Hindoos, and in place of the more diffuse arguments of the Vedas, is always referred to as equal authority . . . the Vedanta, although perpetually quoted, is little known to the public. . . . I have to the best of my abilities translated this hitherto unknown work . . . and distributed [it] . . . free of cost, among my own countrymen, as widely as circumstances have possibly allowed.

(Rammohun Roy, *English Works* II: 59–60)

Of course, by translating the Vedantic texts into English, Rammohun addresses also foreigners. This was his explicit intention. In the Preface to the English translation of the Katha Upanishad, Rammohun states:

I had some time ago the satisfaction of publishing a translation of the Katha-Upanishad of the Yajur-Veda into Bengalee; and of distributing copies of it as widely as my circumstances would allow, for the purpose of diffusing Hindoo scriptural knowledge among the adherents of that religion. The present publication is intended to assist the European community in forming their opinion respecting Hindoo Theology,

rather from the matter found in their doctrinal scriptures, than from the Puranas, moral tales, or any other modern works, or from the superstitious rites and habits daily encouraged and fostered by their self-interested leaders.

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 23)

Clearly Rammohun wanted to give the foreigners a better impression of the 'Hindoo' scriptures than they would otherwise have gained from the mythological story-books (the Puranas) or from modern Hindu rituals which they might have observed themselves in India or about which they may have read in papers or travelogues. Of course, the prime superstitious rite against which Rammohun fought was the suttee. But the 'superstitious rites' also include the many pujas for the different Hindu Gods and Goddesses. English translations of some of the classical Upanishads should convince the Europeans that Hinduism in its Vedic and Vedantic origin was the moral and theological equal to (Trinitarian) Christianity, if not superior to it. However, Rammohun's main interest was in spreading the liberating word of Vedanta and its oldest source-texts, which he designates as 'doctrinal scriptures' in contrast to the narrative scriptures such as the epics and the Puranas. Rammohun calls the Vedanta 'Hindoo Theology', a rather fitting description of the content of the Upanishads.

He intended his translations also to undermine the influence of the religious leaders of his day, the Brahmin pandits, the ritual experts that were always hired to perform the larger public and private rituals. He calls them 'self-interested leaders' as they get rewards for their services and thus are thought to have a vested interest in promoting the need for elaborate rituals. But all this is going against the spirit and the letter of the oldest Hindu theological scriptures, according to Rammohun. Thus these original sources of Vedanta need to be disseminated. In the Preface to his English translation of the Isha Upanishad, Rammohun even suggests that many Brahmins knew that 'idolatry' or the ritual worship of Hindu Gods and Goddesses was not the true essence of Hinduism and on purpose kept the scriptures of Vedanta hidden from the public:

Many learned Brahmins are perfectly aware of the absurdity of idolatry, and are well informed of the nature of the purer mode of divine worship . . . as in the rites, ceremonies and festivals of idolatry, they find the source of their comforts and fortune, they . . . advance and encourage it to the utmost . . . by keeping the knowledge of their scriptures concealed from the rest of the people.

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 44)

To prove that the original Hindu scriptures teach monotheism was a lifelong endeavour of Rammohun. The Vedanta offers the oldest and most consistent version of Hindu monotheism and monism. But this was not entirely



unknown throughout the history of Indian religion and philosophy even though Rammohun could regret that his latter-day Hindus had almost completely forgotten this or never bothered to cultivate this knowledge. In his endeavour to acquaint his fellow Hindus with the liberating ideas of the Vedanta, Rammohun introduces a new modern concept, namely 'public use'. In his opinion a large public – anonymous and evidently not limited by caste or religious affiliations – has to be informed of the teachings contained in the original Hindu scriptures. The public, thus defined, would benefit by this knowledge. Rammohun elaborates upon the idea of 'public use' in a letter written in 1827 to John Digby. Rammohun sums up his reasons for translating and disseminating the 'original' scriptures of Hinduism.<sup>20</sup>

I . . . with a view of making them [i.e. the Hindus] happy and comfortable both here and hereafter, not only employed verbal arguments against the absurdities of the idolatry practiced by them, but also translated this most revered theological work, namely, Vedant, into Bengali and Hindustani<sup>21</sup> and also several chapters of the Ved, in order to convince them that the unity, of God, and absurdity of idolatry are evidently pointed out by their own scriptures.

(Rāmmohan Racanāvalī: 461)

The argument of providing comfort to Hindus in general by acquainting them with the true meaning of the ancient scriptures of Hinduism also occurs in Rammohun's introduction to the translation of the Kena Upanishad (1823). There he explains the idea of 'comfort' in more detail:

I trust, by explaining to my countrymen the real spirit of the Hindoo Scriptures, which is but the declaration of the unity of God, tend . . . to correct the erroneous conceptions . . . with regard to the doctrines they inculcate. It will also, I hope, tend to discriminate those parts of the Vedas which are to be interpreted in an allegorical sense, and consequently to correct those exceptionable practices, which not only deprive Hindoos in general of the common comforts of society, but also lead them frequently to self-destruction, or to the sacrifice of the lives of their friends and relations.

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 13)

In connection with 'self-destruction' Rammohun adds a note on the same page: 'As at Prayaga, Ganga Sagar, and under the wheels of the car of Jagannath'. About 'sacrifice' Rammohun adds another note on the same page:

As, for instance, persons whose recovery from sickness is supposed to be doubtful, are carried to die on the banks of the Ganges. This is practiced by the Hindoos of Bengal only, the cruelty of which affects even Hindoos of Behar, Ilahabad, and all the upper provinces.

Yet the main thrust behind Rammohun's interest in disseminating the Upanishads was his conviction that these texts teach monotheism and a simple but high morality. For Rammohun,

the Vedanta by declaring that 'God is everywhere, and everything is in God,' means that nothing is absent from God and nothing bears real existence except by the volition of God, whose existence is the sole support of the conceived existence of the universe.

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 47)

This is the main doctrine of the Upanishads as understood by Rammohun. This statement is made in the Preface to the translation of the Isha Upanishad, the first Upanishad he translated into English. In the Preface to this translation, Rammohun elaborates in greater detail what he thinks Vedanta is teaching than in the shorter introductions to the English translations of Upanishads he published subsequently. The present statement highlights the main ideas of the Isha Upanishad itself. If there is only one single Divine substance out of which the whole universe evolved, other Gods or Divinities need not be worshipped as God; at best they may be respected as fellow creatures (of a higher order). Worship, according to the same Preface, is nothing but the 'purity of mind' which is 'the consequence of divine worship, and not of any superstitious practices' (op. cit.: 48). Moreover: 'Adore God alone. . . . Nothing excepting the Supreme Being should be adored. . . . God alone rules the mind and relieves it from impurity' (op. cit.: 48). In the Introduction of the same Isha Upanishad, Rammohun regrets

the obstinate adherence of my countrymen to their fatal system of idolatry, inducing . . . the violation of every humane and social feeling. . . . I have been impelled to lay before them genuine translations of parts of their scripture, which inculcates not only the enlightened worship of one God, but the purest principles of morality . . . I pray that [these translations] . . . may . . . prove efficient in producing on the minds of Hindus in general, a conviction of the rationality of believing in and adoring the Supreme Being only; together with a complete perception and practice of that grand and comprehensive moral principle – *Do unto others as ye would be done by.*

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 52)

Rammohun claims that the Vedanta teaches a simple and pure monotheism, a rational belief in one God and remarkably enough suggests that the golden rule (Matthew 7:12; Luke 6:31) somehow summarises the morality of the Vedanta as well. Comparing this English Preface with the Bengali version of the same publication reveals how Rammohun tried to adapt his writing to what he thought his intended audiences would expect of him. In the Bengali

version of the preface to the *īśopaniṣat* (also published in 1816), Rammohun writes towards the end of the Bengali preface (*bhūmikā*):

Some people say that it is improper to undertake the worship of [or meditation on] Brahman if the mind is not purified in the proper way. To answer this [we say]: the shastras [sacred texts] state that the desire to know Brahman arises as soon as the mind is purified by whatever means. Therefore, as soon as we see that someone desires to know Brahman, it is certain that that person has a purified mind, because when the cause is there, the effect is produced. And yet who could tell precisely how the mind was purified? Through spiritual practice (*sādhana*), or the company of holy persons, or because of mental impression [acquired in] previous [lives], or through the grace of a spiritual preceptor (*guru*)?

(Rāmmohan Rāy, Upaniṣad: 23; Rāmmohan-Granthāvalī I: 202–3)

Here the question Rammohun is trying to answer is: who is eligible for the spiritual practice of meditation on Brahman as prescribed in the Vedānta, i.e. the Upanishads which are the wisdom or knowledge part of the Veda? The last statement in the Bengali Preface contains a prayer, not a reference to the golden rule as in the English version:

O Supreme Self (*paramātman*), liberate us from all afflictions like hatred, malice, envy, and partiality; and send us true knowledge!

(op. cit.: 23, 203)

In order to show what attracted Rammohun in the Vedānta and how he understood the Isha Upanishad, the following passages from his actual English translation (rather a paraphrase) may suffice. First the initial verse of the Isha Upanishad:

1st. All the material extension in this world, whatsoever it may be, should be considered as clothed with the existence of the Supreme regulating spirit: by thus abstracting thy mind *from worldly thoughts*, preserve thyself *from self-sufficiency*, and entertain not a covetous regard for property belonging to any individual.

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 53)

In this famous verse the ‘Supreme regulating spirit’ encompasses the whole universe, the whole world with all its living beings. This at least is what the original Sanskrit seems to mean. With this thought one should mentally envelop the whole world and regard the whole world as being ‘clothed’ with this spirit (representing the Sanskrit *īś* or *īśa*, ‘Lord’, ‘ruler’). Interestingly, in the Bengali version, Rammohun uses the word *paramēśvar*, ‘Supreme Lord’ to paraphrase the Sanskrit *īś* (cf. Rāmmohan Rāy, Upaniṣad: 27). The Bengali is thus closer in meaning to the Sanskrit original than the English.

The next lines paraphrase in italics to some extent Shankara's interpretation of the verse. For Rammohun it was important that the Upanishad could be regarded as teaching mental control and abandoning all thoughts of more worldly forms of ritual religion. The simple moral rule in the verse is: do not desire other people's material possessions.

4th. The Supreme Spirit<sup>22</sup> is one and unchangeable: He proceeds more rapidly than the comprehending power of the mind: Him no external sense can apprehend, for a knowledge of Him outruns even the internal sense: He though free from motion, seems to advance, leaving behind human intellect, which strives to attain a knowledge respecting Him: He being the eternal ruler, the atmosphere regulates under Him the whole system of the world.

5th. He, the Supreme Being, seems to move everywhere, although He in reality has no motion; He seems to be distant *from those who have no wish to attain a knowledge respecting him*, and He seems to be near *to those who feel a wish to know Him*: but, in fact, He pervades the internal and external parts of the whole universe.

(Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 53)

These translations/paraphrases are not quoted for their accuracy or preciseness. In italics Rammohun added glosses to the verse which he had found in the commentary by Shankara whose interpretation Rammohun followed. The fourth verse describes the Supreme spirit or simply the neuter Brahman as a transcendental being that is not available to the senses nor to the mind. In other words, the real transcendence, even though immanent, cannot be directly perceived. And yet, as the indwelling spirit of the world (cf. verse 1), Brahman regulates everything. The fifth verse adds to this the doctrine of Brahman, the indwelling spirit and true Self of the universe, being both immanent and transcendent, being far and near. In Shankara's interpretation, 'distant' or far means 'far away for those who are not interested in knowing this spirit'. Hence, 'near' means 'near to those who do wish to know the true Self of the universe'. However, the original verses are far more terse. I give them here in Zaehner's translation for comparison:

1. This whole universe must be pervaded by a Lord, –  
Whatever moves in this moving [world].  
Abandon it, and then enjoy:  
Covet not the goods of anyone at all.

...

4. Unmoving – One – swifter than thought (*manas*), –  
The gods could not seize hold of It as It sped before [them]:  
Standing, It overtakes [all] others as they run;  
In It the wind incites activity.  
5. It moves. It moves not.

It is far, yet It is near:  
 It is within this whole universe,  
 And yet It is without it.  
 (Zaehner 1966: 165)

The sum and substance of Rammohun's reformation intentions may now be clear: contemporary Hinduism has strayed from the worship of the one true God of the Vedas. The cunning and self-interest of Brahmin pandits (priests) has inspired many stories about Gods and immoral practices of these Gods. Their worship by means of images and idols keeps the ordinary believers in bondage and even enjoins them to indulge in cruel practices. Hence there is a need to inform the believers of the true form of worship of the real God proclaimed in the Vedas. The most sacred summary of the Vedas is the Vedanta, especially as laid down in Badarayana's Brahma Sutra or Vedanta Sutra. This text, probably from around the beginning of the common era is considered to be the second of the three canonical foundations of Vedanta: first the Upanishads as part of the *shruti* (or Veda) and third the Bhagavad Gita as Smriti (tradition). But it is the Advaita Vedanta especially that Rammohun proposes as the last word of the Veda: in other words, the doctrine of the radical non-duality (*a-dvaita*) of Brahman and its fundamental identity with Ātman, the supreme Self of which the individual self forms an inseparable part.

Rammohun translated into English four small classical Upanishads: Isha, Kena, Katha and Mundaka<sup>23</sup> and published an English summary of the Brahma Sutra called *An Abridgement of the Vedant* (1816).<sup>24</sup> The latter is an English translation of his Bengali summary of the teaching of the Brahman Sutra which he published under the title *Vedāntasāra* (1815).<sup>25</sup> And yet his first and most important Vedantic publication, as well as the largest one is his Bengali rendering of the complete Brahma Sutra, published in 1815 under the title *Vedāntagrantha*, 'Book on Vedanta'. In his interpretation of the sutras he closely followed Shankara's commentary.<sup>26</sup> What he did in this publication he also did in subsequent translations into Bengali: he gave the Sanskrit original and added the Bengali translation/interpretation to the Sanskrit text. He did this verse by verse or aphorism by aphorism. This method of publishing Sanskrit texts with translation has been followed throughout the nineteenth century and is used even nowadays (for instance in the many bilingual translations of Hindu Sanskrit classical texts published by the Ramakrishna Mission or even the ISKCON). After the Bengali Brahma Sutra, Rammohun published Bengali translations of: Kena Upanishad (1816), Isha Upanishad (1816), Katha Upanishad (1817), Mandukya Upanishad (1817) and Mundaka Upanishad (1819).<sup>27</sup> Except for the Mandukya Upanishad, Rammohun brought about their English translation.<sup>28</sup> This is remarkable because the Mandukya is in a way the only foundational document of the Advaita Vedanta and its doctrine of the division of the Supreme Self in four parts. The term *advaita* describing the highest aspect of

the Self occurs only in this little Upanishad, not in the other four. Shankara's own Advaita philosophy/theology derives indirectly from this same short Upanishad (consisting only of 12 full sentences in Sanskrit). The Advaita philosopher Gaudapada was the theological 'grandfather' of Shankara.<sup>29</sup> Gaudapada was the earliest non-anonymous author to write a commentary (at least that has come down to us!) on an Upanishad, namely the Mandukya. Gaudapada's four essays along with the text of the Mandukya itself form the ancient basis of Advaita Vedanta.<sup>30</sup>

Why may Rammohun not have wanted to translate the Mandukya also into English? Killingley probably rightly observes:

While the other Upaniṣads which he [i.e. Rammohun] translated can readily be interpreted as supporting a view of Brahman as author and ruler of the universe, like the God of Western theism, the Mandukya clearly identifies Brahman with the self, the basis of our consciousness, which it also regards as the source of all phenomena.

(Killingley 1982: 22)

This particular doctrine, if pursued to its ultimate consequences, leads to pure individualism, includes the idea of the visible world as a magic show (*māyā*) and inculcates the philosophical/mystical/religious practice of abstract meditation which does not appear to require congregational worship. Advaita Vedanta in its ancient form is a system meant for total world-renouncers, or at least it is mostly associated with world-renouncers. Neither world-renunciation, nor world-denial, nor the non-duality of man and God were doctrines that would immediately attract 'worldly' followers. Moreover, Advaita Vedanta would have appeared as undiluted blasphemy to Western Christians in the early nineteenth century, for it equates man with God and regards the universe as a magic show or an illusion. Sociologically speaking, these doctrines make perfect sense: the full realisation of oneself in complete world-renunciation makes one equal to the source of the social world-order, makes one equal to the *dharma*. And the illusion is the illusion of the hierarchical social order which the total renouncer leaves behind for what it is to him or her: i.e. illusory. The ideological difficulties arise when they are regarded as ontological statements. In fact, these doctrines (identity of man with God and the illusory nature of the world) embody the psychological attitudes of the total renouncer vis-à-vis the social world. This kind of teaching is – like many Indian doctrines – not only philosophy, nor only theology but primarily soteriology. The teachings of Advaita Vedanta have always been associated with the soteriology of complete world-renunciation. Advaita Vedanta in Rammohun's mental make-up constituted the acme of Indian soteriology and redemptive psychology. Rammohun regarded Shankara – its most famous promulgator – as an undisputed authority in Hindu religious matters. Rammohun translated another Advaita treatise into Bengali but again not into

English: *Atmānātmaviveka*, 'Distinguishing between the Self and what is not the Self', a text attributed to Shankaracharya.<sup>31</sup>

It seems that what attracted Rammohun to the Vedānta in general as a theory about the Divine and humankind are the following: (1) the existence of a single Deity who pervades the universe and in a way *is* the universe (but this confirms the general immanent tendency of Hinduism); (2) knowledge of this sole Deity and worship of only this Deity (the One without a second) constitutes the practice of Vedānta; (3) this form of knowledge and worship is open to all, being the prime religious duty taught in the Vedas. With these doctrinal points Rammohun believed he had found the most simple and yet essential form of religion (Hindu as well as beyond Hinduism).

Unlike the prolixity of sacred texts devoted to the mythological stories of the different Gods and Goddesses of later Hinduism, the Vedānta has a relatively small, classical and venerably ancient canon: the ten classical Upanishads, the Brahma Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita. If Rammohun had the Christian New Testament and the Koran in mind as examples of religious canons, he could not but select the Vedantic scriptures as his Hindu counterpart. The New Testament and the Koran have in common that they are authoritative factual texts of limited size and that they are foundational for Christianity and Islam respectively. If the criteria of a canon are: fixed written text, limited size and authoritative for all adherents, then the list of ten classical Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita form the closest analogue to the New Testament and the Koran. To this extent one could fully agree with Fernhout's thesis that the Veda is the canon of Brahmanism (Fernhout 1994: 4–5). But neither the Vedas, nor even the Upanishads, have ever been factually the canon of every form of Hinduism everywhere throughout the ages. Contrary to Christianity and Islam which prescribe a universal study and knowledge of the content of their canons, Hinduism does not have any such universal rule with regard to the Vedas. Only Brahmins are supposed to study the Vedas, not all Hindus. Against this background Rammohun proposed something novel: to regard the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita as a universal Hindu canon. Although Rammohun does refer to the Bhagavad Gita with some regularity, he did not publish any translation of it.<sup>32</sup>

The Upanishads actually form part of the Veda and therefore would in principle be acceptable to all Hindus. But the emphasis is on 'would be in principle' because even the Veda as canon in the way Fernhout analyses it (op. cit.) is a canon for a small group. Rammohun proposed the ten classical Upanishads as forming a universal Hindu canon. His choice was partly inspired by foreign admiration for the Upanishads. The Mughal crown prince Dara Shikoh (1615–59) studied them and translated them from Sanskrit into Persian. This Persian translation was later translated into Latin. This Latin translation evoked European admiration for the Upanishadic wisdom, notably Schopenhauer's.

The Upanishads, also known as the 'sacred knowledge part' (*jñāna-kāṇḍa*) of the Veda, direct the mind of the individual seeker after spiritual truth to

contemplate the sole Divine ground of the universe, a principle of which the human soul in its deepest layers partakes. In this contemplative Upanishadic spirituality there is no need for Brahminical priests to perform rituals and sacrifices, basically because the Upanishads teach the ethos of renunciation. By insisting on this Vedantic/Upanishadic spirituality alone as the true essence of Hinduism, Rammohun thought he could make clear to his audience the defects of contemporary Hinduism and the need to return to the purity of the original source of Hinduism. In this way Rammohun tried to effect a real break with traditional Hinduism, for he brought the sphere of renunciation within the confines of the social order, thus potentially unsettling that very order. Instead of maintaining the balance between the social order and renunciation, Rammohun pleaded for replacing the social order with inner total renunciation. To make the swap possible, Rammohun chose the example of Western Calvinist Protestantism. To prepare his Indian audience for the Hindu reformation, Rammohun pointed to the glaring differences between Vedanta-theology and spirituality on the one hand, and contemporary ritualistic Hinduism on the other. Vedantic Hinduism seemed to be humane and modern, while contemporary Hinduism evinced morally reprehensible practices such as suttee, and the ritual worship of many Gods and Goddesses.

Like the Protestant reformers in Europe, Rammohun spread his message into the regional languages, and translated parts of the scriptures into the vernacular. Like the Protestant reformers, Rammohun made ample use of the printing press to disseminate his ideas and thus tried to create a reading public. Obviously Rammohun's target audience was the educated middle class and the intelligentsia, including the Brahminical religious specialist, the *pandits*. The religious authority to which Rammohun appeals in order to convince his audience are the Upanishads. In this respect Rammohun tried to emulate the Protestant reformers who appealed to the Bible as the sole religious authority of Christianity. Like the Protestant reformers, Rammohun wished his audience to study these ancient scriptures for themselves and arrive at their own conclusions concerning the doctrinal content and form of worship. Rammohun initiated the trend of publishing Hindu scriptures in vernacular translations for popular consumption.

### **Institutional aspects**

Creating a reading public for religious texts by means of the printing press is one part of the Reformation both in Europe and in India, the other equally important part is creating and keeping together bodies of adherents who form more or less stable congregations. Congregations or churches are the institutional bedrock of the Reformation and thus of nascent modernity, because it is through congregations and church-like families that the Reformation discourse gets disseminated and above all internalised in a personal way. Congregations also fulfil an important social role: they bind together



people who have joined the congregation on a voluntary basis. Through the written word, e.g. tracts, books, fliers, pamphlets and magazines, the public gets to know the conceptual content of a given discourse. Those who more or less agree with the content may wish to voluntarily join an organisation, in this case the church, which takes further care of their spiritual needs. As mentioned in the preceding chapters the Protestant Reformation insisted on the freedom of conscience. In the initial phase of the Reformation in the sixteenth century, people changed allegiance from Roman Catholicism to Protestantism, partly through personal conviction. In subsequent centuries when the reformed churches were well-established institutions, membership was more based on traditional family ties and social conformity. But the idea of personal conviction – a conviction which one was supposed to understand and defend – still remained the ideal basis for joining a particular church. In this way, the ancient Christian concept of personal conversion was revived in Protestantism. Also the Roman Catholic church initially gained most of its adherents on a voluntary basis. But this happened only in antiquity, before Christianity had become an official state-cult.

The organisational differences with Protestantism are also prominent in the realm of church authority. The Roman Catholic church follows a top-down pattern: doctrinal and organisational authority ultimately rests with the Pope and trickles down via bishops and priests to the laymen. In the Protestant churches authority is organised more bottom-up: from the local congregations up to the national synods (cf. Gorski 2003: 55–8). Ultimate authority in Protestant churches rested with the elites of a given congregation, not with a supranational authority. Subsequently, political republicanism followed the Protestant model of organising authority. The institution of the modern nation-state in the last analysis seems to run parallel to Protestant church organisation.<sup>33</sup> Protestantism, moreover, did not have to invent the institution of the church, it only had to nationalise it. Thus what the Protestant reformers had to do was to advise the parishioners to change allegiance and adopt the Protestant mode of worship. But they did not have to introduce the concept of a closely knit group of regular churchgoers organised in a local parish church as a complete novelty.<sup>34</sup>

Against this background we can have some idea of the organisational problems Rammohun had to grapple with. Obviously, Rammohun could not simply emulate the Western church model for his Hindu reformation, for Hinduism was never organised along congregational lines. The Indian models available to him were the sect in its Hindu form, the Buddhist sangha, the mosque and the circle of followers around a Sufi saint or a Pir. Rammohun thus had to adopt any of these Indian models, or adopt the Western model, or create a mixture of both. But he saw the need for organisation.

The first congregational grouping which Rammohun established for the worship of the Vedantic Brahman was the *Atmiya Sabha*, 'Society of Friends' in 1815. It lasted till 1819. Rather than a formal organisation with a registered membership, this society was a loose circle of like-minded

persons belonging largely to Rammohun's own class of enlightened zamindars (landowners). At their meetings, held in Rammohun's own house, passages from the Vedas were read out by Rammohun's Sanskrit teacher, Pandit Sivaprasad Misra. Gobinda Mala sung hymns devoted to Brahman, the beginning of the *brahma-sangit*, songs devoted to the One Brahman (cf. P. K. Sen 1950: 116–17). An account by a contemporary describing happenings in 1816 has the following:

In the month of March, during the saturnalia of the Holee festival, Rammohun Roy and his friends convened a meeting in Calcutta, and held their first religious service: Chapters were read from the Vedas which inculcated the unity of the God-head: hymns were chanted, in which power and glory were ascribed to the One Omnipresent and All-powerful Being. This was the origin of that religious movement among the intelligent Hindoos of Calcutta and its vicinity which resulted in the establishment of the 'Brahma Sabha' or Society of Vedantists.<sup>35</sup>

Rammohun was well-acquainted with Protestantism, and felt especially attracted to its Unitarian form.<sup>36</sup> Unitarian Christianity inculcated the worship of God alone; it laid more stress on Jesus's ethical precepts than on Jesus's divinity, his miracles, the vicarious atonement on the Cross and the Resurrection. Unitarianism rejected all these elements of the Christian doctrine as mythological. Rammohun was in close cooperation with Unitarians in Calcutta. Between 1820 and 1823 he published four large tracts on Christianity.<sup>37</sup>

In 1821 the Calcutta Unitarian Committee was formed by some (mainly Scottish) Unitarian Christians, prominent among whom was William Adam and Rammohun with some of his Indian followers. Rammohun represented the Vedic monotheistic trend within this group. He was in control of the group as far as finances were concerned (cf. Dobson Collet 1988: 137–8). He expressed his views on Unitarian Christianity in a letter written in 1822:

my view of Christianity is that in representing all mankind as the children of one eternal Father, it enjoins them to love one another, without making any distinction of country, caste, colour, or creed.

(Dobson Collet 1988: 139)

The Committee was changed into the 'British Indian Unitarian Association' in 1828. The aims of the Committee were recorded in the 'Bengal Chronicle' of 27 October 1827, as follows:

not . . . for the propagation of Christianity. History, science, and philosophy, the committee regard as the handmaid of true religion . . . whatever . . . has a tendency to diffuse the benefits of education, to destroy ignorance and superstition, bigotry and fanaticism, to raise . . .

the intellect . . . will be . . . within the scope of their design. The melioration also of the physical condition of the numerous native population, the encouragement of the useful arts and of industrious habits amongst them . . . the committee regard as legitimate objects of pursuit . . . only when the first wants of nature and society are fully supplied . . . the improvement in intellect, in morals, and in religion, can be expected to follow.

(Majumdar 1983: 74)

Neither the Unitarian committee nor its successor, the Association, were able to attract many followers. Attendance of the Sunday meetings was rapidly dwindling (cf. Dobson Collet 1988: 218). The 'British Indian Unitarian Association' whose aim was among others to seek closer contacts with Unitarians in Great Britain and the United States, never fully came off the ground.

The Hindu Unitarians led by Rammohun formed their own society and began holding meetings in a rented house since the 20th of August 1828. This society was named 'Brahmo Samaj' or 'society of believers in Brahman'.<sup>38</sup> In its outlook it resembled Christian Unitarianism, but the use of Hindu scriptures seems to have alienated the Christians in the Unitarian Association/Committee. Rev. Adam, a prominent member and organiser of the Unitarian Committee expressed his ideological estrangement from Rammohun in a letter dated January 1829:

There has . . . been formed a Hindu Unitarian Association [i.e. the Brahmo Samaj], the object of which is, however, strictly Hindu and not Christian, *i.e.*, to teach and practice the worship of One Only God on the basis of the divine authority of the Ved, and not of the Christian Scriptures. This is a basis of which I have distinctly informed Rammohun and my other native friends that I cannot approve.

(Dobson Collet 1988: 221)

The Brahmo Samaj, however, retained a Protestant mode of conducting worship. Passages from the Vedas and the Upanishads were read in Sanskrit, explained in Bengali and hymns in Bengali were sung. In this respect the Brahmo Samaj emulated the originally Calvinist austere form of church service: readings from the Scriptures in vernacular translation, sermon in the vernacular and singing of Psalms in rhymed translation. In Rammohun's church, the hymns had to be composed new, as happened in later Protestantism. Rammohun composed some of them. His associates also composed hymns. For Rammohun, the Vedas meant the classical Upanishads. The Brahmo worship and church organisation were thus adapted from Protestant examples. Dilip Kumar Biswas in his editorial note on Rammohun and William Adam remarks: 'Unitarian Christianity . . . supplied Rammohun with a solid formal basis for his Universal Church when he was in

desperate need of it' (Dobson Collet 1988: 242). But Rammohun's outlook, according to Biswas, was universal as it was shaped by the 'Upanishads, the social message of Buddhism, the emphatic monotheism of Islam, the simple piety . . . of the . . . *bhakti*-movement, the ethical teachings of Jesus Christ' (Dobson Collet 1988: 244).

The contemporary perception of Rammohun's church was actually somewhat different from Biswas's appraisal of Rammohun's universalism. The magazine *Reformer*, quoted in *Asiatic Journal* of January 1832, called the Brahmo Samaj 'a Vedant institution' where 'meetings are held every Saturday evening' and 'preaching from the Vedant and singing psalms in praise of the one true God occupy the time of those who meet . . . to worship the eternal Creator of the universe' (Majumdar 1983: 90). The same account mentions that 'Christians and men of every persuasion are permitted to be present at the religious acts . . . and as the preaching on the texts of the Vedant is in . . . the vernacular Bengalee, all can understand what is said' (ibid.: 90). A more elaborate account of the Brahmo services is found in the *Calcutta Christian Observer*, March 1833. The services according to this source were held once a week. Three 'eminent Pundits are engaged to conduct the service, viz., Ramchunder, Ootsobanundo, and a Hindoostanee reader, called Bawjee' (ibid.: 91–2). The first explains 'the text of Vyas', i.e. the Vedanta Sutra, 'Ootsobanundo [i.e. Utsavananda] explains the Upanishads' while 'Bawjee simply reads portions of the Vedas, in the original Sanscrit language' (ibid.: 92). The first two 'read and expound, in the Bengalee language, the science of the Vedas and Puranas; and after the service . . . any individual seeking information, has an opportunity of discussion with the Pundits' (ibid.: 92). The aim of the 'Brumha Shubha [i.e. Brahma Sabha] is to make known that part of the Vedas which is either unknown, forgotten, or neglected'. The same account makes the 'Pundits' explain the two parts of the Vedas, i.e. the jnanakanda and the karmakanda. The 'first teaches the true knowledge and spiritual worship of God', the second 'the manner of performing ceremonies . . . together with the several duties, social and religious, devolving upon the several orders' (ibid.: 92). Both are necessary because the 'uninitiated or ignorant cannot understand the *inner*, till they have practiced the *outer*, religion . . . idols and ceremonies are a *means* to spiritual knowledge' (ibid.: 92). These 'Vedant Priests' also teach 'the doctrines and practices prescribed in the Smritis or Puranas'. Yet 'they do not bow down to idols, but worship the one eternal, invisible Spirit, *having been* as they arrogantly affirm, *sufficiently enlightened for the purpose*' (ibid.: 92).

The same source devotes some space to the musical aspect of the service. The hymns that were sung were composed not only by Rammohun himself. Other poets are mentioned by name: 'Neelmoney Ghose' and 'Kaleenath Roy'. The audience enjoyed the singing more than the 'sermon or exposition' which are 'certainly unintelligible to the majority' (ibid.: 92). The account praises the quality of the singing and the music. Both are 'superior to

what Europeans are accustomed to hear from Natives elsewhere' (ibid.: 92). A tabla player is mentioned by name: Golam Abbas. Other instruments the author of the account had seen being used were: tanpura, behala (a kind of violin) and mandiras (small cup-shaped cymbals). The account also records that during musical performances there was applause (cf. ibid.: 92–3). The picture one gets from this description is not that of a strict church service but rather of a musical soiree interspersed with solemn religious readings, explanations of religious texts and discussions. It is not unlikely that the music was one of the main attractions for the congregation, rather than the prospect of listening to sermons on the Vedas and the Upanishads. But that theologically the principal thrust of the Brahmo Samaj was clearly based on the Vedanta, is also apparent from the reference to 'Vedant Priests'. To the Christian observer who wrote this account, in any case, the Brahmo Samaj appeared to be a Vedantic Hindu church of sorts. The author is of course not very much in favour of the goings on, and even accuses the 'Pundits' of arrogance. Remarkably enough, the author seems to add a tinge of criticism of the intellectual freedom the Brahmo Samaj created for itself, by among others, defying the custom to bow down to 'idols'. It is also remarkable that Rammohun himself does not play a leading role in the service itself: the gatherings are conducted by Brahmins.

Some Christian comments on the early Brahmo Samaj were much more hostile than the account just referred to. The Tory magazine *John Bull* in its issue of 12 January 1830 carried a letter to the Editor. In this letter, undersigned 'A Christian', the author exclaims that the newest 'tendency of educated natives, *to reject all the established forms of belief and worship*' will 'aid in promoting . . . atheism itself' (Majumdar 1983: 82). Moreover, Rammohun and his 'co-adjutors' are 'such latitudinarians in religion, as *to reject all the established forms of belief and worship*' that they must be 'also staunch *liberals* in their politics' (ibid.: 82). Tory circles evidently regarded Rammohun as a supporter of liberal religion and thus bestow upon him the opprobrium of 'latitudinarianism' and 'political liberalism'. Although Tories were staunch supporters of official British Christendom and showed nothing but contempt for Hinduism orthodox or otherwise, they felt compelled to support orthodox Hinduism against the even greater danger of religious free-thinking and political liberalism. This remarkable double standard lasted with British Tories well until after Independence. The *John Bull* tried once more to put down Rammohun in an article dated 16 October 1830:

Many of our readers . . . must know, that various and rather strange revolutions have taken place in Ram Mohun Roy's religious opinions; and the last position in which we have heard of his being placed, was that of a Theo-philanthropist, discarding . . . all belief whatever in Revelation.  
(ibid.: 85)

It was apparently better to be an orthodox Hindu and obey orthodox customs – earning in the process the disdain of Christian Tories – than not believing in any revelation at all. A reactionary Hindu was preferable to a progressive Deist and an Indian to boot. These Tory opinions on Rammohun should suffice to show that many of his contemporaries did not regard him as a reliable pillar of British-Indian society.

Although the Brahmo Samaj had started holding congregational gatherings in a rented place from 1828 onwards, the real foundation day is 23 January 1830. For on that day the Brahmo Samaj began to conduct services on its own premises. An eyewitness, Montgomery Martin reminisced in 1835:

The institution was opened by the late Rajah Rammohun Roy, accompanied by the writer (the only European present) in 1830. There were about five hundred Hindus present and among them many Brahmins who, after the prayers and singing of hymns had been concluded, received gifts in money to a considerable extent.

(Dobson Collet 1988: 268)

The fact that Brahmins received money suggests that Rammohun wanted to gain recognition for his group in a traditional fashion, as it was a common practice to invite and feed Brahmins at large traditional public Hindu ceremonies. Besides, Brahmins that preside over a ritual on behalf of others traditionally receive a reward in money and kind for their services. That is what happened here too. Thus it seems Rammohun was above all a Hindu reformer and moderniser of Hinduism and only secondarily a religious universalist.

## Trust deed

The oldest legal foundational document of the Brahmo Samaj is the ‘Trust Deed’. For the most part this document specifies the conditions of the transfer of some land and the brick building on it from Dwarakanath Tagore, Kalinath Roy, Prasannakumar Tagore, Ramchandra Vidyavagis and Rammohun Roy to three trustees. The deed was signed on the 8th of January 1830. The crucial part of the document is the passage that specifies the purpose of the building on the land. First of all the building is to be

a place of *public meeting of all sorts and descriptions of people without distinction* [emphasis added] as shall behave . . . in an orderly sober religious and devout manner, for the worship and adoration of the Eternal Unsearchable and Immutable Being who is the Author and Preserver of the Universe, but not under . . . any . . . name designation or title peculiarly used for . . . any particular being or beings by any man or sect of men whatsoever.

(Dobson Collet 1988: 435)

The place of worship is thus open to all irrespective of caste, class, race or gender. Here we can discern the intention (at least in principle) to create an egalitarian community of believers. The object of worship shows the same intention. The one God who is to be worshipped is not specified and should in principle be acceptable as an object of veneration to all believers in explicitly theistic religions. These would include theistic Hinduism (Rammohun's own position), Islam, Judaism, Parsism and Christianity. The stipulation of the Trust Deed excludes religious specificities. The Deed continues that on the premises

no graven image statue or sculpture carving painting picture portrait or the likeness of anything shall be admitted . . . no sacrifice offering oblation . . . shall . . . be permitted . . . no animal or living creature . . . shall . . . be deprived of life.

(Dobson Collet 1988: 435)

This injunction is meant to keep away all specific religious symbols or acts of animal sacrifice. The latter is relevant mostly for the Hindu ritual forms of worship of the great Goddesses Durga and Kali which entails often sacrificing goats and buffaloes, but the injunction could also refer to the Islamic practice of Qurban and Jewish Korban (sacrificial slaughter of animals). And yet on the premises no religious practice or mode of worship may be reviled:

in conducting . . . worship . . . no object animate or inanimate that has been . . . is or shall . . . be recognized as an object of worship . . . shall be reviled or slightly or contemptuously spoken of . . . either in preaching praying or in the hymns.

(ibid.: 435)

The only things that the congregational services must promote are:

charity morality piety benevolence virtue and the strengthening the bonds of union Between men of all religious persuasions and creeds.

(ibid.: 436)

The 'worship 'on the premises must' be performed daily or at least as often as once in seven days' (ibid.: 436). It is with these provisos of the Trust Deed that we have approached closest to a Protestant form of Hinduism.

The fact that the Trust Deed itself does not specify Hinduism by name is no argument against the Hindu disposition of the Brahmo Samaj. Its theology is Unitarian/Deist, monotheistic and Vedantic. Its institution is open to all people of every religious background who may congregate to worship the single Divinity in a non-sectarian prayerful manner. The institution is not founded on or supported by strict hierarchies based on ritual purity.

It does not adhere to external symbols or paraphernalia for its religious services. But in this early phase of its existence the Brahmo Samaj was still attached to Brahminical authority because Brahmins were conducting the services. Although not acting as priests, it was only they who read the Vedas and explained them to the public. As far as the church service is concerned, some general characteristics the Brahmo Samaj shared with Protestant Christianity: reading from sacred books, singing of hymns and a sermon; all the worshippers are equal before God; the majesty of God may not be tainted by visible symbols or elaborate rituals (which have a tinge of magic and propitiation about them). But again unlike Protestantism, the Brahmo Samaj did not hunt for religious differences in order to condemn them as heresies; it simply overlooked differences in religious traditions and forbade criticising them. Theologically, the Brahmo Samaj seemed already much more Deist than most Protestant denominations of those days. But as far as the building of the ecclesiastical institution was concerned, the Brahmo Samaj was no duplicate of Protestant churches. However, it did form the nucleus of a religious, cultural and social (and later also political) avant-garde. And to promote modernity, the Samaj had to adapt the traits of a traditional Hindu sect consisting of charismatic (world-renouncing) leaders and a lay following, to the exigencies of a modern (egalitarian) society. In other words: the Brahmo Samaj had to stamp on the traditional Hindu sect the form of a Protestant church community. This, indeed, was a daunting task.

## Notes

- 1 See Marshall (1987).
- 2 See the interesting volume: *Rammohun Roy and the Process of Modernization in India*. Edited by V.C. Joshi. New Delhi: Vikas Publ. House, 1975.
- 3 On other hand, Dipesh Chakrabarty in his *Provincializing Europe* (2001: 120–3) says about Rammohun that in his zeal to reform society he was driven by compassion or sympathy (*dayā*). Chakrabarty attributes this moral characteristic also to the famous nineteenth-century Bengali educationist Iswarchandra Vidyasagar (1820–1901).
- 4 See Rammohun's 'Appeal to the King in Council', *The English Works*, Part IV: 11–31; *Rāmmohan Racanāvalī* 1973: 508–28.
- 5 In fact the phrase 'Upanishadic principles of one rule of law' is unfelicitous. Nowhere do the Upanishads speak about 'rule of law'. Robertson is probably trying to convey the sense of the Hindu term *dharma*. But rule of law is not found in the Upanishads – it is after all a Western legal term – nor does *dharma* in Hindu civilisation carry the meaning of rule of law. Moreover, freedom of sadhana is an equally unfelicitous phrase as it does not occur in the Upanishads. The concept of freedom of religion could be read into the Upanishads only if the latter are squeezed hermeneutically to their utmost.
- 6 For a general outline of the Hindu caste system one can still fruitfully consult the great work of Dumont (1980). On food and marriage see Dumont (1980: 130–46). For a discussion on caste that builds on Dumont but pushes his insights much further, see Heesterman (1985: 180–93). A more recent summary of new insights on caste and related matters is found in Michaels (2004: 159–75). See



also Fuller (2004: 11–20). For a collection of critical essays on Dumont's ideas, see Khare (2006).

- 7 Cf. the following statement from the most famous Sanskrit work on *dharma*, the Manava Dharma Shashtra or in common shorthand Manu: 'The root of *dharma* is the Veda in its entirety; the traditions (*smṛiti*) and the good conduct (*śīla*) of those that know the [Veda]; the practices (*ācāra*) of the virtuous (*sādhū*); and what gives satisfaction to oneself' (Manu II: 6). I follow the edition of J. H. Dave, *Manu-Smṛiti*, Vol. I. Bombay: Bharatiya Vidya Bhavan, 1972.
- 8 This is famously described in hymn 90 of book 10 of the Rig Veda. This hymn states that the Gods created the social order by sacrificing the primal Spirit, called Purusha, which simply means also man. Out of this sacrifice the Gods fashioned men, cattle, horses, the Vedas and the four social classes with the Brahmin priests as the highest, as the head of this Purusha.
- 9 See, for example the entry *dhamma* in the Pali dictionary of Rhys Davids and Stede.
- 10 It should be remembered that in its earliest phase Buddhism held out as the sole religious ideal complete renunciation of worldly life and taking refuge in the Buddha, the teaching (*dhamma*) and the community of monks (*saṅgha*). In order to gain the awakening (*bodhi*) which the Buddha had reached, one was advised to become a monk or a nun, because only thus could the goal be quickly realised. The same is true in Jainism.
- 11 All the translations from Sanskrit are my own.
- 12 The only other form of inner renunciation that was available in ancient India was Mahayana Buddhism and its ideal of the bodhisattva. The latter is a Buddhist saint who aims at the full awakening of a Buddha but remains in the world as long as it takes to bring all other living beings into Nirvana (cf. the third chapter of the famous Mahayana scripture, the Vajracchedikā, more commonly known as the 'Diamond Sutra'). It seems the bodhisattva ideal of Mahayana resembles that of the *karma-yoga* of the Bhagavad Gita. I must stress that these are sociological generalisations and not refined theological comparisons. Followers of Mahayana Buddhism and the Bhagavad Gita would probably vehemently deny any similarities in intent in this respect between their respective religious sources. Nevertheless, it remains an interesting phenomenon that Mahayana scriptures and the Bhagavad Gita appeared more or less contemporaneously. In Buddhist iconography the bodhisattvas are always represented in royal attire in order to distinguish them from monks and the Buddha himself. For a detailed description of the world-saving ethos of a bodhisattva, cf. the 47 vows of the bodhisattva Dharmākara in the Sukhāvatīvyūha Sūtra (Gomez 2002: 69–76, 166–72).
- 13 Although we are emphasising here the later Brahminical trends of world-renunciation, it should be borne in mind that these remarks are also valid for Indian Buddhism and Jainism.
- 14 This potential lawlessness explains to some extent why world-renouncers are revered as well as feared in Hindu society. A complete renouncer stands above and outside of good and evil.
- 15 The original Sanskrit text is found in Mukerjee (1997). A much better German critical edition of the Sanskrit text is found in Hauschild (1967). Hauschild argues for a late date of this text; around the thirteenth or fourteenth century AD (op. cit.: 55). I think this dating is too late for the whole of the text but this is not the place for philological arguments. Besides, in the context of our present discussion, the precise dating of this source is not very important.
- 16 Nor did the Buddha, for that matter. In the pre-modern situation, the sacred social order and the sphere of renunciation were each other's complementary opposites. The stability of Hinduism as a social arrangement derived from the harmonious balancing act of sacred world-order and renunciation. Both reinforced each other, being two sides of the same dharmic coin.

- 17 As *yama* includes non-violence it is very likely that the restrictions intend to bring the person who trains in this *yoga* close to Brahminical values.
- 18 I am aware of the fact that this remark is politically incorrect for Indian secularists and politically very correct for adherents of the Hindu extreme Right. I believe we cannot sacrifice independence of investigation and academic freedom on the altar of this or that political bias. Our scholarly task is to find truth along rational lines while not bowing to any political pressures.
- 19 For details see Dobson Collet (1988: 4–5); Killingley (1993: 9–10).
- 20 As already stated before, I do not intend here to debate the actual validity or wrongness of Rammohun's claim that the Vedas and the Upanishads are the original scriptures of Hinduism. One could perhaps say that he was wrong because Hinduism never evolved from a limited written canon, and that he was right because the Upanishads constitute an important ancient textual source for later Hindu theology.
- 21 This Hindustani translation seems to be lost. Rammohun's Bengali translation of the Brahma Sutra is being reprinted to this day.
- 22 In the Bengali paraphrase, Rammohun uses the word *paramātmā*, 'Supreme Self' (Rāmmohan Rāy, Upaniṣad: 29).
- 23 Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 1–55; the sequence is somewhat erratic. First Mundaka Upanishad (1819) pp. 1–9; Kena Upanishad (1823) pp. 13–20; Katha Upanishad (1819) pp. 23–38; Isha Upanishad (1816) pp. 41–55.
- 24 Rammohun Roy, English Works II: 59–72.
- 25 Rāmmohan-Granthāvalī. I: 117–26; Rāmmohan Racanāvalī: 63–8.
- 26 Rāmmohan-Granthāvalī. I: 3–113; Rāmmohan Racanāvalī: 7–60.
- 27 Rāmmohan-Granthāvalī. I: 187–268; Rāmmohan Racanāvalī: 69–84 (Kena and Isha), pp. 126–54 (Katha and Mandukya), pp. 180–8 (Mundaka). Rāmmohan Rāy, Upaniṣad 1996 gives all five Bengali translations in a single volume.
- 28 For the Bengali introduction and text of Rammohun's Mandukya translation, see Rāmmohan Racanāvalī: 142–54 and the recently reprinted five Bengali Upanishads translation published by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, Rāmmohan Rāy Upaniṣad: 100–21. Killingley (1982) has a complete English translation of Rammohun's introduction to the Mandukya (pp. 22–9).
- 29 I am not discussing in this context the relative dating of Gaudapada and whether he really existed and could have been the master of Shankara's alleged guru Govindabhagavat. These questions are not very relevant for the period we are investigating, namely the early nineteenth century and the role Advaita may have played in the development of an Indian modernity discourse.
- 30 For an elaborate discussion of the Mandukya and Gaudapada, a full English translation of the texts of the Mandukya and Gaudapada's four essays and a useful bibliography on the subject, consult: Thomas E. Wood. 1992. *The Māṇḍūkya Upaniṣad and the Āgama Śāstra: An Investigation into the Meaning of the Vedānta*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ. Another publication which is still quite indispensable, although it dates from 1943 is: Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya. Reprint 1989. *The Āgamaśāstra of Gaudapāda*. Edited, translated and annotated by Vidhushekhara Bhattacharya, Forward by Christian Lindtner. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publ.
- 31 The Bengali text is found in Rāmmohan Racanāvalī: 201–11. Rammohun's translation occurs in a separate volume together with his *Vedāntasāra*, published by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj, which is still being reprinted.
- 32 For a study on the use Rammohun made of the Bhagavad Gita in his writings see Satya P. Agarwal. 1997. *The Social Role of the Gita: How and Why*. New Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publisher, pp. 15–48. Most of the Gita passages Agarwal discusses occur in Rammohun's polemical writings against the practice of suttee.
- 33 This is not to say that the Protestant churches in the times of the Reformation, as for example in the Dutch Republic which adopted Protestantism as a

revolutionary political doctrine, were democratic in the present-day sense of the word, promoting universal suffrage. In the Dutch Republic the churches were run by local elites, cf. Israel (1998: 341–51).

- 34 For the situation in the Protestant Dutch Republic, cf. Israel (1998: 364–72). Pre-Reformation parishes in England were closely-knit communities celebrating festivities that involved all parishioners, cf. Marshall (2003: 3–11).
- 35 This passage is taken from *The Life and Times of Carey, Marshman and Ward*, Vol. II, Chap. XII, p. 129. The source for this quotation is P. K. Sen (1950: 119).
- 36 Unitarianism is a form of Christianity which rejects the concept of the Trinity. Unitarianism denies the divinity of Christ while emphasising the unity and uniqueness of God. In this respect Deism is a logical outcome of Unitarianism. Vedantic monotheism and monism share many concerns with Deism and Unitarianism. The freedom of conscience, however, is an important doctrine in Deism and Unitarianism, which goes back to Calvinism, as was discussed in the previous chapter.
- 37 *The Precepts of Jesus* in 1820; *An Appeal to the Christian Public* in 1820; *Second Appeal to the Christian Public* in 1821; *Final Appeal to the Christian Public* in 1823. These four books comprise almost half of Rammohun's total published output in English.
- 38 The original and first name of the Hindu Unitarian movement is Brahmo Samaj and not Brahmo Sabha. See on this the long note by Dilip Kumar Biswas inserted in Dobson Collet (1988: 235–8).

## 4 The 'Further Reformation' of Hinduism

Debendranath and Keshub

In his study of the Brahmo Samaj in the nineteenth century, David Kopf treats the prominent intellectuals in the movement as 'Hindu puritans'. He calls the Brahmo Samaj a 'Protestant movement' whose ethic was both 'puritanical' and 'liberal' (cf. Kopf 1979: 102). Throughout the book, Kopf's tacit assumptions are: (1) Brahmoism represented a Protestant movement in Hinduism; (2) Brahmo Protestantism embodies the spirit of Hindu modernity; (3) this spirit manifested itself in early anti-colonial nationalism in India.

After Rammohun's death in 1833 in Bristol, the Brahmo Samaj as an organisation was almost dead. The number of Brahmo followers had dwindled. There were three main causes for this: (1) no organisational form along constitutional lines; (2) no standardised rituals (or liturgy) for the congregational services; (3) no sense of urgency to make new converts to the cause of reformed Hinduism. The first point would not have been perceived as a serious problem in the first half of the nineteenth century. Points 2 and 3 came to be perceived as real problems that obstructed further progress of the movement. There was a fourth issue that arose towards the end of the nineteenth century: somehow the Hindu reformation as represented by the Brahmo Samaj seemed alien, a foreign importation in mainstream Hindu culture. The reason for this feeling of alienation became apparent only towards the end of the nineteenth century. Let us first see how the first three issues were dealt with.

### Debendranath Tagore (1817–1905) and his calling

Like Rammohun, Debendranath belonged to the educated Hindu upper classes of Calcutta. Debendranath's father Dvarakanath had been an associate of Rammohun, and moreover, one of the wealthiest entrepreneurs of his time.<sup>1</sup> Debendranath grew up in luxury. Rammohun never wrote an extensive autobiography detailing his intellectual and spiritual maturing. Debendranath felt the need to offer an account of his early life and spiritual struggles; he had his memoirs published in Bengali in 1898. In the book he attempted to show how he had become the second prophet of Brahmoism.

His autobiographical narrative focuses on events that he considered important in this respect. His book reads more like a lengthy confession of faith illustrated with significant events from his personal life than like an autobiography telling a complete life-story. Debendranath ends his story significantly in 1858 when the Mutiny (or First War of Independence) had just been suppressed in North India and Keshub Chandra Sen had joined the Brahmo Samaj.<sup>2</sup> Debendranath considered his spiritual *Werdegang* to have been completed in the year 1858. Debendranath had studied Benjamin Franklin's *Autobiography* and seems to have adopted a similar form. Other Brahmos in the late nineteenth century were also engaged in writing their autobiographies.

What is the significance of this for the evolution of modernity in India? One of the markers of the spirit of modernity is the emphasis on the emancipation and full blossoming of the individual. The other marker is the internalisation of a well-argued and seriously held system of beliefs and doctrines. In an autobiography, the author documents his or her beliefs and the roads that led to holding them. In other words, the autobiography explains to the public how this particular individual became who he or she now is and what intellectual and spiritual developments moulded the present beliefs this individual holds. Obviously the confessional autobiography is not meant to provide mere historical facts nor meant to entertain. Its high purpose is to instruct and edify, and to encourage others by narrating actual and meaningful happenings (in which one is supposed to recognise the hand of a providential God). The confessional autobiography also exemplifies the Protestant doctrine of the sanctification of ordinary family life: for daily working life lived in accordance with one's calling is the substance of Protestant sanctity. The autobiography reveals how this sanctity was lived; how the author was 'called' and how he (or she) passed through many vicissitudes. This Protestant stress on factuality and meaningful narratives – or rather the idea that only things that really took place are worth narrating and give meaning to life – is a derivative from the Protestant reading of the Bible itself. For the Bible has religious meaning because, and in so far as, it narrates God's plan with humanity. This plan becomes visible through the enfoldment of history in linear time.<sup>3</sup> The autobiography reveals God's plan with the author through the 'calling' and work life. These facts account to some extent for Protestant literalism as far as Biblical narrative is concerned.

Although the first example in Western literature of religious autobiographical self-analysis is St. Augustine's *Confessions*, as a specific (religious) literary genre the autobiography emerged in seventeenth-century England. Especially after 1640, the number of published autobiographies increased significantly. This increase is generally attributed to the growing importance of Puritan individualism (cf. Ebner 1971: 17). By the close of the seventeenth century the number of autobiographies written by Puritans of different persuasions amounted to over a hundred (op. cit.: 18). Also

in seventeenth-century France, Protestants resorted to autobiography to give testimony of the persecutions they underwent after the revocation of the Edict of Nantes in 1685 (cf. Paige 2001: 121). English Puritanism was preoccupied 'with the experience of conversion', involving 'a psychological methodology for the guidance of the individual soul in its conversion, or effectual calling' (Ebner 1971: 31). This conversion and spiritual guidance were the inner motivation for many outer changes that seventeenth-century England witnessed, including political revolution and civil war (cf. Ebner 1971: 31). Paul Delany notes that in seventeenth-century England Calvinists wrote autobiography as history of the soul and as exemplar for the hearers (1969: 37). He also refers to the Puritan habit of keeping a dairy (Delany 1969: 63). Presbyterians wrote spiritual autobiographies for the encouragement and edification of fellow Christians. The Bible book of Psalms seems to have given the inspiration to the Puritan habit of soul-searching (op. cit.: 56). Thus in the latter half of the seventeenth century under the impact of Puritanism, the religious autobiography was a well-known form of English literature. These examples travelled also to nineteenth-century British India. Debendranath was among the reformed Hindus to make use of the same genre for almost identical purposes. Debendranath's great concern was his giving public testimony of his 'conversion' as a direct experience of God.

In Debendranath's autobiography, the 'calling' and the spiritual trials and tribulations are narrated but not in relation to work life. Debendranath narrates these matters only in relation to his religious life. The Protestant element in the story is Debendranath's intention to show how God revealed His plan with him. Debendranath highlights his life-story as what he would have wanted to be in a religious sense: i.e. a world-renouncing seeker after God, but it is inner renunciation which gives ultimate meaning to Debendranath's life. At least, this is the message Debendranath himself wishes to convey.

He opens his narrative at the point when he was eighteen years old. His maternal grandmother, who is very fond of him, is dying. She is brought to a shed on the banks of the Ganges in Calcutta. Debendranath is sitting near her shed. He is listening to the singing of the names of Hari, another name of the great Hindu God Vishnu. This singing is done for his grandmother.

The sounds reached my ears faintly, borne on the night-wind; at this opportune moment a strange sense of the unreality of all things<sup>4</sup> suddenly entered my mind. I was as if no longer the same man. A strong aversion to wealth arose within me.<sup>5</sup> The coarse bamboomat on which I sat seemed to be my fitting seat, carpets and costly spreadings seemed hateful,<sup>6</sup> in my mind was awakened a joy unfelt before.

(Devendranath Tagore, *Auto-biography* 1994: 2;

Debendranath Thakur, *Ātmajīvanī*: 2)

This joy and renunciation of worldliness must come from God. Debendranath analyses his feelings in a passage following immediately upon this quotation.

Up to this time I had been plunged in a life of luxury and pleasure. I had never sought after spiritual truths. What was religion, what was God? I knew nothing, had learnt nothing. My mind could scarcely contain the unworldly joy,<sup>7</sup> so simple and natural, which I had experienced at the burning-ghat. Language is weak in every way, how can I make others understand the joy I felt? It was spontaneous delight, to which nobody can attain by argument or logic. God himself seeks for the opportunity of pouring it out. He had vouchsafed it unto me in the fullness of time. Who says there is no God? This is proof enough of His existence. I was not prepared for it, whence did I receive this joy? With this sense of joy and renunciation,<sup>8</sup> I returned home at midnight.

(Auto-biography: 2–3; Ātmajīvanī: 3)

Two ideas in this passage need to be highlighted. The first is that God or the Transcendent has to be personally experienced; the second that such experience is associated with renunciation of the conventional social world.<sup>9</sup> In the previous chapter we have referred to world-renunciation as the breeding ground of Indian individualistic spirituality and hence the area to look for potential modernity. In this passage Debendranath associates his feeling of God's presence with renunciation. This becomes understandable in view of the fact that in Indian religions world-renunciation is the sphere of spirituality *par excellence*.

Debendranath expresses his sympathy with the spirit of renunciation also in a passage where he claims that in a continuing mood of renunciation he gave away pictures and furniture to a relative (cf. Auto-biography chapter 3). His apparent aloofness from worldly squabbles and his spiritual dignity earned him the epithet *Maharshi*, 'great [Vedic] seer'.

Debendranath wishes to convey to the reader his desire for the knowledge and the vision of God. It is God who, as it were, called Debendranath, not the other way round:

God in His mercy gave me the spirit of renunciation (*vairāgya*), and took away from me my attachment for the world (*samsāra*). And then He who is the source of all joy gave me new life by pouring streams of joy into my mind. This mercy of His is beyond compare. He alone is my *Guru*. He alone is my Father.

(Auto-biography: 4; Ātmajīvanī: 5)

This sense of *vairāgya*, 'the state of being without partiality or without passion' is the source of Debendranath's spirituality. He underlines once more his desire – which is fulfilled by God – to be free from attachment to *samsāra*,

the social world. Throughout his book Debendranath comes back to the theme of world-renunciation. He is, however, stressing the inner renunciation as the source of his quest for God. He never advocates the traditional formal renunciation as described in the Brahminical texts. Inner renunciation kept Debendranath in proximity to the traditional *bhakti*-movements.

In order to give direction to his quest, Debendranath decided to learn Sanskrit from the family pundit, Kamalakanta Chudamani. English philosophy was added to this study programme (cf. Auto-biography: 5–6; *Ātmajīvanī*: 7–8). The study of English philosophy seems to have suggested to Debendranath a materialist outlook. A crisis of faith ensued. Suddenly, Debendranath tells us, he realised that the Infinite existed as he was gazing at the endlessness of the sky studded with stars and planets. God must be without form. It is He who created with His perfect wisdom the transient world of things (cf. Auto-biography: 7–8; *Ātmajīvanī*: 9–10). Contemplating God's formlessness Debendranath remembered Rammohun. As a child Debendranath had met Rammohun regularly. Debendranath recalls how he ate lichees in Rammohun's garden and how on the occasion of Durga Puja he was sent by his father to invite Rammohun. The latter politely turned down the invitation. Now, Debendranath writes, he realises that Rammohun objected to 'idolatry'. Remembering these scenes from his youth Debendranath decides to follow Rammohun and also reject idolatrous pujas, abandon 'idolatrous preachings', and pay no heed to any sacred book that teaches it (cf. Auto-biography: 9–10; *Ātmajīvanī*: 12–13).

Debendranath explains that he had been under the wrong impression that all Hindu texts were teaching 'idolatry'. That this is not always the case Debendranath came to know by a curious incident. He writes how one day he suddenly saw a page fluttering in front of him. The page contained some text in Sanskrit. Debendranath is curious, picks up the page, tries to read it but cannot understand it. Shyamacharan Bhattacharya, a Sanskrit scholar does not understand the text either but suggests he go to pundit Ramchandra Vidyavagish as the text seems to have to do with the Brahmo Samaj. Vidyavagish explains that the text is the first verse of the Isha Upanishad.

[One] must [see] all this, whatever moves on the earth,  
as the dwelling of the Lord.  
You should use [only] what is relinquished by him.  
Do not be greedy for anybody's wealth.<sup>10</sup>

The content of this verse satisfied Debendranath's deepest aspirations and religious yearnings. From now on he decided he must study the Upanishads with Vidyavagish and other pundits. Debendranath wanted to share his new-found faith in the Upanishads with others. For this purpose he started in 1839 a society for the spread of the Vedanta as taught in the Upanishads. This society was named Tattvabodhini Sabha, 'Society for Enlightenment about the Truth'. Debendranath appointed Vidyavagish as its scriptural



teacher. The meetings were held monthly on the first Sunday evening (cf. Auto-biography: 10–13; Ātmajīvanī: 13–16). During these meetings, lectures were delivered by members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha on the theology of the Upanishads. These meetings started in December 1839 and probably stopped in May 1840. Twenty-one of these lectures have survived in summary form in Bengali which the Sabha brought out in a booklet in 1841 under the title *Sabhyadiger Vaktṛtā*, 'Discourses by Members of the Society'. This booklet is extremely rare. Brian Hatcher (2008) translated it into English for the first time, thus filling up the gap between the writings of Rammohun and Debendranath's theological innovations with the *Brahmo Dharma*. The content of these lectures show that the members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha regarded the Vedānta, and especially the Upanishads selected and translated by Rammohun, as the basis for a reformed, humane, theistic and non-ritualistic Hinduism.

Thus the story of the fluttering page of Sanskrit with the first verse from the Isha Upanishad – which by coincidence cleared up Debendranath's deep-seated doubts – seems to suggest Divine providential intervention (cf. Hatcher 2008: 39–42). God once more called Debendranath. This time the 'call' did not happen through subjective feelings of joy but by a very concrete message printed on paper. For the story it is immaterial whether this event took place in the manner in which Debendranath narrates it. He is trying to build a case for the authenticity and Divine origin of the Upanishadic monotheist reformation that he effected within the sleeping Brahmo Samaj in 1843. From a historical point of view it seems somewhat unlikely that neither Debendranath himself, nor the Sanskrit scholar to whom he showed the torn page, were unable to recognise or understand the first verse of the Isha Upanishad. Perhaps Debendranath suggested that the full understanding of the import of that verse was effected only by Vidyavagish, the pundit who was keeping the Brahmo Samaj alive, practically on his own.

## Reforming the Brahmo Samaj

The Tattvabodhini Sabha lasted till 1859 when it officially merged with the Brahmo Samaj (Hatcher 2008: 63). Like the Brahmo Samaj, the Tattvabodhini Sabha did not attract many followers. Debendranath wrote that the members of his Sabha were working in a disconnected fashion. And besides, the education of the reading public should be taken up. For this purpose Debendranath started the paper Tattvabodhini Patrika in 1843. In the same year he formally joined the Brahmo Samaj and made his own Tattvabodhini Sabha manage the affairs of the moribund Brahmo Samaj (cf. Auto-biography: 13–16; Ātmajīvanī: 17–21). This was easy because the members of the Tattvabodhini Sabha identified more and more with the aims of the Brahmo Samaj and its founder, Rammohun (Hatcher 2008: 56–9). The Tattvabodhini Patrika continued to exist and became the intellectual mouth-piece of Brahmo theology. It devoted itself to spreading the ideas of Rammohun.

Soon after he joined the Brahmo Samaj, Debendranath undertook theological, organisational and liturgical changes intended to draw a larger, more constant, following. Debendranath had expressed his regret that most Hindus did not know the Vedānta and its teachings about the formlessness of God. Those Hindus that felt uneasy about 'idolatrous' image-worship began to feel drawn to 'other religions', thus ran Debendranath's concern. In order to discourage the latter, he wanted to disseminate the Vedānta (cf. Auto-biography: 15; Ātmajīvanī: 19). In the Brahmo Samaj this intention was going to be fulfilled. However, the tenets of this ancient and venerable Vedānta needed to be thoroughly scrutinised. Debendranath found much in classical Vedānta not to his taste. Shankaraist monism had to go (cf. Auto-biography: 18; Ātmajīvanī: 24). It did not matter to Debendranath that Rammohun might have regarded Vedāntic monism, Advaita, as the last word of Brahmoism. In the Bengali original of the Auto-biography the term *advaita* is mentioned and Debendranath exclaims: 'We opposed idolatry, similarly we opposed the doctrine of Advaita' (Ātmajīvanī: 24). He believed in devotional worship of God and thus in the difference between worshipper and the object of worship.

In the field of liturgy Debendranath simplified and standardised the procedure of the Brahmo prayer service. He selected a few verses from the Upanishads to serve as standard prayers/mantras during the service. He kept the sermon and the singing of hymns. He also introduced the recital of Bengali translations of the Sanskrit prayers. The purpose of these innovations was in fact sectarian clarity. Debendranath wished to distinguish between a real and regular Brahmo worshipper and stray visitors to the services. Debendranath introduced the formal initiation into Brahmoism (cf. Auto-biography: 22; Ātmajīvanī: 29–30). Early on he had already abolished the practice of readings of the Vedas only for Brahmins (cf. Auto-biography: 15; Ātmajīvanī: 20).

Debendranath was also trying to introduce Brahmo reformism within his family. When Dvarakanath, his father, died in London in 1846, some months later a *shraddha* had to be performed.<sup>11</sup> Debendranath performed the *shraddha* but did not use the traditional mantras. Instead, he used texts from the Upanishads. Afterwards he was practically ostracised by his uncles and his father's acquaintances (cf. Auto-biography: 35–9; Ātmajīvanī: 52–7).

A few years earlier Debendranath had gone to Benares to learn more about the actual content of the Vedas. To his initial amazement and horror they contained as much polytheism and 'idolatry' (in his opinion) as the contemporary Hinduism he was familiar with. He writes:

I was obliged to give up altogether the hope of propagating the worship of *Brahma* by means of the *Vedas* which sanction the *karma-kāṇḍa*.<sup>12</sup> We now turned from the Vedas and became *Veda-sannyāsi* householders. *Agni* [the Vedic God of sacrificial fire] also no longer retained a predominant place in our domestic ceremonies. . . . But the *Brahmavadi* sages

of old renounced (*parityāg kariyā*) everything and became *sannyāsis* . . . disgusted with the elaborate rites of the *yajñas*,<sup>13</sup> so contrary to wisdom, and desirous of salvation, they betook themselves to the forest. . . . The Upanishad is the Upanishad of the forest (*aranya*) . . . in the forest was it preached, in the forest was it taught. . . . The Upanishad came to our hands in the very beginning.

(Auto-biography: 46–7; Ātmajīvanī: 67)

The most remarkable point in this observation is the emphasis on world-renunciation (*sannyasa*) to explain his religious position. In Debendranath's view when the Vedic sages of old were really asking themselves fundamental questions about the ultimate meaning of life – they got 'disgusted with the elaborate rites' of the great sacrifices – they turned away from traditional ritualism. Debendranath is using the somewhat exceptional term *Veda-sannyāsi* which must mean something like 'those who renounce the [ritual portion of the] Vedas'. By this he implies that the Vedic rites did not provide anymore the answers to ultimate questions of religious meaning. The old sages renounced tradition as it were and went to the forest. Only there – in Debendranath's interpretation of Vedic culture – wisdom could be and was found. The Upanishads recorded this wisdom. For Debendranath the search for purified and reformed Hinduism more or less ends with the Upanishads. To legitimise his quest Debendranath continues to refer to the sphere of world-renunciation. For him that meant the sphere of Hindu reformation, as we will presently see. Rammohun's reformation of Hinduism included much openness to liberal Christianity and some understanding of Islam. Debendranath is unequivocally a Hindu reformer who does not venture outside the world of Hinduism. But within this world Debendranath was willing to propose what to outsiders may look like a drastically undogmatic approach to Hindu scriptural authority. But in fact, pure individualism in religious matters is an integral component of the ethos of traditional Hindu world-renunciation. Whatever did not suit him, Debendranath simply discarded after much trial and testing. One by one he had discarded the worship of the traditional Hindu Gods and Goddesses of his time: Krishna, Rama, Durga and Kali; the theology/soteriology of the strict monism of Advaita Vedanta; the traditional family ceremonies; and the Vedic form of ritual (which was never practised in his household anyway). He also showed little regard for caste-differences. All of these acts of defiance could in fact be legitimised in the light of the idea of world-renunciation which also entails the renunciation of ritual worship of the traditional Gods. Of course, Debendranath did not advocate monkhood. He did remain a householder all his life. He became the role model of a Hindu Protestant householder practising inner renunciation.

A year after his father's death, the family firm Carr Tagore and Co. was unable to pay its debts. Consequently the management of the firm was practically put in the hands of the creditors. Debendranath and his brothers

would receive an allowance but the firm in liquidation was managed by the creditors. Debendranath and his brothers thus had given up their property. To him this felt like renouncing worldly goods and prestige. He writes:

I reduced my staff of servants, sent all my horses and carriages to be auctioned, brought my food and clothing within reasonable bounds – became a *sannyāsi* while staying at home.<sup>14</sup>

(Auto-biography: 50–1; Ātmajīvanī: 73)

### Brahmo religious authority

Brahmoism, in Debendranath's estimation, needed a foundation, a source, of religious authority, much in the way the Bible became the sole religious and scriptural authority in Protestantism. Debendranath investigated many different classical Hindu scriptures. The later mythological works such as the epics Mahabharata and Ramayana, the Puranas and the Tantras could be easily dismissed because of their 'polytheism'. On similar grounds Debendranath discarded the Vedas. This left him with the Upanishads, the very texts on which Rammohun had based his reformation of Hinduism. But with the Upanishads two problems arose. First, although the classical ones espoused different doctrines, monism was certainly among them. In Debendranath's understanding this doctrine amounted to full identification of man with God, a view which Debendranath could not endorse. The second problem was caused by Debendranath's discovery that there existed dozens of alleged Upanishads, most of which were of late origin and devoted to the same Puranic deities whose worship Debendranath had already rejected. He explains:

These Upanishads [i.e. the 11 classical ones] could not meet all our needs; could not fill our hearts. Then what was to be done now? What hope was there for us? Where should we seek a refuge for Brahmoism? It could not be founded (*pattana-bhūmi*) on the Vedas, it could not be founded on the Upanishads. Where was its foundation to be laid?

I came to see that the pure heart (*viśuddha hṛdaya*), kindled by knowledge (*jñānojjvalita*) and filled (*siddha*) by the experience (*pratyaya*) relating to the self (*ātmya*),<sup>15</sup> – this was its basis. Brahma reigned in the pure (*pavitra*) heart alone. The pure heart was the foundation of the Brahmo Dharma. We could accept those texts only of the Upanishads which accorded with such a heart. Those sayings which disagreed with such a heart we could not accept. There were the relations which were now established between ourselves and the Upanishads, the highest of all *śāstras*. In the Upanishads it is said that God (*īśvara*) is revealed through investigation by the mind (*man*) in connexion with the faculty of understanding free from doubt, joined to the heart, *hṛdā manīṣā*

*manasābhikṣiptaḥ* (Katha Up. 6.9c). God is revealed through a mind which is kindled by the light of the faculty of understanding (*buddhi*) in the pure mood of a sinless and peaceful heart.

(Auto-biography: 59; Ātmajīvanī: 84)

In this remarkable passage Debendranath reveals the core of Brahmo spirituality. He seems to have neared both total individualist Hindu renunciation coupled with Western Deism. The real source of religious authority and guidance is not to be found in any written text but in the heart, the understanding and mind of the believer. The implication of this doctrine is quite in consonance with the Hindu concept of world-renunciation. The world-renouncer has approached an immediate source of *dharma*: the realisation of the Self. Debendranath retains as much of this concept as is consistent with his dualistic theological intuitions. Using the phrase *ātmapratyaya*, 'experience of the Self' from the monistic Mandukya Upanishad, he interprets this as one's personal experience of the one God.<sup>16</sup> When he subsequently quotes this passage from the Mandukya in his Brahmo Dharma (part I, text 77) he again interprets *ātmapratyaya* as 'personal experience'. I think in this passage Debendranath is moving in the direction of a Hindu doctrine of the freedom of conscience. But the actual doctrine of conscience has no direct parallel in Hindu thought.<sup>17</sup> It remains a Christian doctrine which was worked out among others by post-Calvin Protestant theologians. Yet the resemblance of Debendranath's idea of the pure heart as the real source of religious authority with the Christian idea of conscience is striking enough. Even the pre-Christian philosophical meaning of the Greek term for conscience, *syneidēsis*, would fit the psychological phenomenon Debendranath calls the 'pure heart'. Debendranath's main problem was how to reconcile monistic or polytheistic Hindu scriptures with the devotional theism that he had found in his own heart, so to speak. A connected problem that engaged Debendranath's mind was: on what could Brahmoism base its religious authority?

The problem that now occupied my thoughts was this: what was to be the common ground for all Brahmos? Tantras, Puranas, Vedas, Vedanta, Upanishads, none of these afforded a basis of unity for Brahmos, a foundation for Brahmo Dharma. I decided that the Brahmo Dharma must have a creed (lit. *bījamantra*) that should be the meeting-point of all Brahmos.

Thinking thus, I laid my heart (*hrdaya*) open to God (*īśvara*), and said, 'Illumine Thou the darkness of my heart (*hrdaya*).' By His mercy my heart was instantly enlightened. With the help of this light I could see a creed (*bīja*, a seed or kernel) for the Brahmo Dharma. . . . I thought next that the Brahmos required a sacred book: and thereupon asked Akshay Kumar Datta to take pen and paper and write to my dictation. Then I concentrated my mind (*ekāgracitta haiyā*) and laid open my

heart to God. The spiritual truths that dawned on my heart through His grace, I went on uttering as fluently and forcibly as the current of a river falling from the mouth of the Upanishads. . . . Thus by the grace of God, and through the language of the Upanishads, I evolved the foundation of the Brahmo Dharma from my heart. Within three hours the book Brahmo Dharma was completed. But to understand its hidden meaning and fully master it, will take me my whole lifetime. . . . The work does not represent the sweat of my brow; but only the outpourings of my heart.

(Auto-biography: 63–4; Ātmajīvanī: 89–91)

These quotations show what the sacred texts meant to Debendranath in connection with religious experience and the foundation of a new religious tradition. It was not texts that provided him with genuine spiritual knowledge. It was only the intimate private experience that can give solace and guidance in matters pertaining to the Divine. The experience of the divine spirit which manifests itself only in the depths of the heart purified of worldliness and evil is the divine authority that one should obey. And yet Debendranath did not outright reject the idea of scriptural authority. That is why he still utilised the Upanishads for private and weekly congregational worship. This passage also affords us a glimpse into the psychology of a world-renouncer and how a renouncer finds his own version of the *dharma*.

### Brahmo scripture, Brahmo Dharma

Debendranath called the book that resulted from his spiritual experience 'Brahmo Dharma'. It is in two parts. The first part consists of 157 passages from the Upanishads which he dictated to his assistant Akshay Kumar Datta. Part two is a collection of 138 ethical maxims culled mostly from Manu and the Mahabharata. Debendranath had a Sanskrit commentary added to the original passages. The first edition in Sanskrit only appeared in 1849. The first edition with Bengali translation appeared in 1854.<sup>18</sup> The book has remained a favourite with many Brahmos until this day.

By introducing this book into the Brahmo cult, Debendranath had combined the non-conformism of Deism with a format of traditional religions. The Brahmo Dharma was not meant to be an unquestionable divine revelation for all times, but it did give direction and shape to Brahmoism. It also linked Brahmoism with mainstream Hinduism, but not fully and not successfully as we will see in the sequel.

The first part of the Brahmo Dharma consisting of Upanishadic texts represents Debendranath's idea of *shruti*, Divine Vedic revelation. In fact, his selection reveals the monotheistic tendencies in the Upanishads. The main themes are Brahman, the Divine substance and foundation of the universe; Atman, the personal self; and the relation between these two. The

Upanishadic texts that are used in the Brahmo congregational prayer services are all taken from this first part.

The second part represents Debendranath's idea of a modern Hindu *smṛiti*; these are texts that explain in an authoritative manner the transcendental message of the *śruti*. *Smṛitis* are many. Their authorship is ascribed to seers of the remote past. *Smṛitis* are the most commonly used scriptural sources of the *dharma*. Traditionally, *smṛitis* describe the hierarchical Hindu social order of four varnas and explain the various duties of the individual in his four stages of life, and all the rituals that belong to these stages. Debendranath's *smṛiti* in the second part of his book forms a marked contrast with traditional *smṛitis*. From a sociological point of view, the second part reveals the social setting of Debendranath's Hindu reformation. This would not have been noticeable in the first part as the doctrines of the Upanishads would have been associated with world-renunciation anyway. In the *smṛiti* part, one would have expected either a support for traditional social hierarchy or something else. And precisely in the second part Debendranath implicitly rejects the traditional hierarchy by not mentioning it. He completely leaves out any description of the system of four varnas, the four stages (*ashrama*) in life and the duties belonging to these stages. What one finds instead is an emphasis on family life, marriage, education, personal work ethic, social ethic, personal morality and in general a stress on following righteousness (*dharma*) and rejecting unrighteousness (*adharma*). Again no specific prescriptions regarding food are found, but only a general emphasis on not getting overwhelmed by luxuries. Debendranath seems to have had in mind urban bourgeois professional classes when he collected the maxims for his new Hindu morality. One is tempted to say that Debendranath's compilation breathes a spirit of Hindu Puritanism. Let us look at a few examples.

### The new social ethic of the Brahmo Dharma

Acquisition of wealth is necessary for the proper maintenance of family life. The relevant text is a quotation from Manu (4: 137). I translate here only Debendranath's Bengali translation as it shows the manner in which he wanted the reader to understand the Sanskrit original. Upon the translation of the text follows a translation of Debendranath's own commentary on this passage:

You should not disrespect yourself now because you did not acquire wealth in the past. Until one's death one should try to acquire wealth; one should not regard this as difficult to accomplish.

[commentary]

The supreme Lord who protects the three worlds has given to man wonderful powers which are sufficient means to provide for one's livelihood. Therefore you should not regard yourself as misfortunate when you

do not possess wealth yet, and you should not become slothful thinking it is difficult to acquire. Even if you have fallen into the misery of poverty, you should not disrespect yourself. Remaining on the path of justice, you must exert yourself and know that as long as you live, you are entitled to gathering wealth. You should realise that the removal of the misery of poverty on earth is a task that is dear to the supreme Lord whose own form consists in joy.

(Brahmo Dharma, Bengali, text II: 30, 142–3)

With the remark that one should exert oneself in gathering wealth for as long as one lives, Debendranath implicitly rejects the traditional Brahminical idea of entering the third and fourth stages of life. The third stage is *vānaprasthya*, staying in the woods, whereas the fourth is world-renunciation itself. Obviously in these two stages one was not supposed to gather wealth anymore as one had done in the stage of *gārhasthya*, 'being a householder'. Renunciation in Debendranath's view meant living as a householder while internally or psychologically renouncing worldliness.

Another important item in traditional Hindu life is food: what to eat, what not to eat, from whom to accept food and from whom not to accept food. Debendranath did not select any verses that specify what food or drink one was allowed or not allowed to take. Also in this respect he seems to have rejected tradition in an implicit manner. The only restrictions on food one could read in his new *smṛiti* is the suggestion that foodstuffs should not be intoxicant, but otherwise all food seems to have been acceptable to him.<sup>19</sup> Debendranath does, however, quote a text which he interprets as enjoining the sharing of food and drink with others. The verse in question is taken from the Mahabharata, Vanaparva (258: 24). Again I leave out the Sanskrit as we are here interested in what Debendranath makes of this verse:

He who distributes eatables and drink and drinks together with others; who is disposed to liberality; who himself enjoys, is happy and non-violent; he enjoys the soundest health.

The supreme Lord who fosters all, will give every kind of enjoyable substance such as food and drink etc. One should deprive nobody; father, mother, brother, sister, sons and wife, friends, and servants. But in a fitting manner one should distribute among all and also enjoy things oneself. One should not at all be selfish regarding food and clothing and other such things. . . . one should give to those who are overburdened by misery, distressed and suffering. But also one should not deprive oneself of the pleasure of enjoyment. Discarding miserliness and luxury one should – with an eye to the upholding of justice/religion (*dharma*) – continue to nourish one's body and mind with substances and enjoyments that are approved of by religion (*dharma*). Do not harm (*himsā*) anybody.

(Brahmo Dharma, Bengali, text II: 71, p. 171)



From this passage it is clear that Debendranath does not endorse asceticism, nor over-indulgence. The idea that one should shun the two extremes of rigorous self-denial and sensual over-indulgence was already expressed in ancient India by the Buddha. In the Pali canon he is portrayed as recommending moderation in his first sermon in Benares, while enunciating the four Noble Truths.<sup>20</sup> The Bhagavad Gita teaches that 'for a person who in proper measure eats and diverts himself, exerts himself, sleeps and keeps awake, spiritual discipline (*yoga*) kills all suffering' (6: 17). Debendranath's view on earthly enjoyments – which he regards as gifts from God to be enjoyed, not shunned – also has parallels in the Calvinist ethos. Consider for instance the following passage from the 1536 edition of Calvin's Institutes:

Surely ivory and gold and riches are good creations of God, permitted, indeed appointed, for men's use by God's providence. And we have never been forbidden to laugh, or to be filled . . . or to delight in musical harmony, or to drink wine . . . But where there is plenty, to wallow in delights, to gorge oneself, to intoxicate mind and heart with present pleasures and be always panting after new ones – such are very far removed from a lawful use of God's gifts.

(Calvin, Institutes 1536 edition, Chapt. VI, A, par. 6, p. 180)

Debendranath was not only aware that life on earth should be lived well, that is without unnecessary outer asceticism, he also endorsed the view that wealth can only be earned through honest labour and implies that the fruits of labour should be used to improve one's surroundings. The Hindu concept of social responsibility and social consciousness is exemplified by the emphasis on liberality as one of the greatest social virtues. To express this Debendranath found a verse in the Mahabharata (Vanaparva 258: 28):

My dear friend, there is no other work on earth as difficult as giving; because people have an enormous thirst for wealth and one gathers wealth only with great pains.

(Mahabh. Vanaparva 258: 28)

[W]hen there is no compulsion or self-interest, no one except a religious seeker is able to give away wealth. One who accumulates wealth with a view to accomplish a work that is dear to the supreme Lord who is the best friend; one who does not love wealth only for the sake of wealth, unselfishly realises the merit, in a religious sense, of the duty of liberality.

(Brahmo Dharma, Bengali, II: 73, 172–3)

If one does work in order to gain income, how does one distinguish right from wrong work? Debendranath answered this question in several places

in the Brahmo Dharma. He does introduce the concept of *dharmajñāna*, 'knowledge of religion', as a Hindu version of the Christian doctrine of conscience. According to Debendranath, *dharmajñāna* is given by God. It implies distinguishing between justice and injustice (*nyāya-anyāya vivecanā*) (Brahmo Dharma, Bengali, 174). In the very beginning of part two of the Brahmo Dharma Debendranath describes this *dharmajñāna* as follows: 'He [God] has given to man the capability to distinguish between religion and irreligion (*dharma-adharma*), this [capability] we call "knowledge of religion"' (Brahmo Dharma, Bengali, 123).<sup>21</sup> One could probably translate *dharma* in this context also by 'righteousness'.

The main point is that work should be done in accordance with justice. Duties prescribed for various castes and varnas are not mentioned in the Brahmo Dharma. One should do work that gives satisfaction, and one should do that diligently. Debendranath does not introduce the Lutheran concept of the calling. He does, however, bend the Manu Samhita verse (IV: 161) in that direction:

If one does a work that brings satisfaction to oneself, than that work has to be diligently done. Work that has the opposite effect, one should discard.

(Manu IV: 161)

The satisfaction of one's inner self (*antarātmā*) is the unfailing fruit of performances in accordance with religion (*dharma*). In self-satisfaction we experience the satisfaction/grace (*prasāda*) of the Lord. If the self (*ātmā*) remains satisfied, all other sufferings are destroyed. The self is not satisfied except through the performance in accordance with religion/righteousness. Through material happiness the mind (*man*, also 'heart') can be happy; but if there is unhealthiness in the self (*ātmā*) then the amassed material pleasures become useless. Therefore we must keep the self satisfied through the performance of righteousness (*dharmānuṣṭhān*), and that which causes a loss of self-satisfaction should be abandoned.

(Brahmo Dharma, Bengali, II: text 99 and commentary, p. 189)

In his commentary Debendranath does not evolve a doctrine of the calling. The proof that one is doing the right kind of work is the satisfaction (in a religious sense) that one may feel. This satisfaction – which is clearly distinguished from material, that is, sensual satisfaction – is the basis of righteousness. This feeling of spiritual satisfaction also seems to point in the direction of another view of 'conscience'. What one feels to be right is God's sign that the actions are in accordance with religion. The essence of ethics in Debendranath's theology consists in self-control which implies rationally judging what one should adopt and what one should reject. Individual judgement and self-satisfaction should guide one through life.

Unselfishness is the best ethical policy, but this does not mean mortification of the senses. Debendranath stresses this point with several quotations. Rational self-control is the key to Brahmo ethics. Debendranath quotes Manu (II: 96):

The senses – attached to sensory objects – are always kept under control through proper use under the command of knowledge; they cannot be as effectively kept [under control] by completely avoiding objects of pleasure.

(Manu II: 96)

The senses are not kept under control by completely avoiding the enjoyment of the pleasures derived from sensory objects. With the help of the faculty of discrimination (*vivek*)<sup>22</sup> one should distinguish between what must be avoided (*heya*) and what must be obtained (*upādeya*); thus one gradually attains success by abandoning an object that must be avoided and grasping an object that must be obtained.

(Brahmo Dharma, II: 105 and commentary, p. 193)

It seems Debendranath may have indirectly derived this whole argument from the Nyāya Bhāṣya, the oldest extant commentary (probably fourth to fifth century CE) on the Nyāya Sūtra, a text presumably from the first century CE. The Nyāya Sūtra offers a philosophy that seeks to base its soteriological and theological claims as much as possible on verifiable knowledge and methodical philosophical debate. The pair *heya/upādeya* occurs (probably for the first time) in the Nyāya Bhāṣya. It is introduced as follows:

When a cogniser has cognised an object with a means of valid cognition, he either wishes to obtain that object or to avoid it.<sup>23</sup>

(Nyāya Bhāṣya, p. 1.2–3)

As to the object, it is happiness and a cause of happiness, as well as suffering and a cause of suffering.

(Nyāya Bhāṣya, p. 1.10)

What is to be avoided (*heya*), its cause, complete avoidance, and the means [by which to avoid] must be known. Having perfectly understood these four terms, one reaches the supreme good.

(Nyāya Bhāṣya, p. 2.15–16)

The idea is that with the means of valid cognition one understands which objects are to be avoided and which are to be obtained. What one wishes to avoid is suffering and causes of suffering, and what one wishes to obtain are happiness and causes of happiness. The ultimate happiness is the obtainment

of the supreme good, which in terms of the Nyaya philosophy meant complete liberation from suffering and rebirth.

It is an interesting fact about the nineteenth-century Hindu reformers that they based their theologies explicitly and almost exclusively on the Vedanta and the Upanishads, as Debendranath did. Of course, part two of the Brahmo Dharma is taken from Manu and the Mahabharata. But no reformer has ever made any explicit reference to, or use of, the old Nyaya philosophy which could have easily provided an ancient and convincing answer to Western claims of rationality. Apparently ancient Nyaya remained an untapped source. This was not for lack of knowledge of its primary source, for the Nyāya Sūtra had been published in the Bibliotheca Indica in 1865. We find occasional vague references to Nyaya categories such as here in Debendranath's comments. That Nyaya had fallen in disrepute in the nineteenth century is due above all, to the high scholastic fineness of Navya Nyaya. It was considered to have been completely superseded by Mill's logic and therefore unworthy of study. The lack of interest in Nyaya and the over-emphasis of Vedanta fostered the notion (often held in the West) that Indian philosophy and religion are irrational. However, let us return to Debendranath.

Nowhere does Debendranath polemicise against any institutions of traditional Hinduism. He simply does not mention them. They are immaterial to the new Hindu dharma that he constructs in the second part of the Brahmo Dharma. In this respect his book is rather unique in modern Hindu apologetics. Most Hindu writers after him often defended the idea of the four varnas as essential to Hindu society and the survival of Hinduism. The following assessment of the second part of the Brahmo Dharma by Kopf, to my mind, still holds good:

Here in the second portion of Debendranath's book can be found, in clear unequivocal language, the official birth of the Brahmo Puritan ethic. However, the sources justifying the ethic are not from Calvin reinterpreting Moses, but from Debendranath reinterpreting Manu.

(Kopf 1979: 106)

In the last sentence Kopf identifies Debendranath as the John Calvin of reformed Hinduism, which delegates to Rammohun the role of the Hindu Luther. One should always be careful with drawing historical parallels. However, this division of roles in the Hindu reformation is not entirely without foundation. Rammohun selected and translated the scriptures, Debendranath provided Brahmoism with a first coherent scriptural theology. The book Brahmo Dharma was intended to fulfil a major role in the propagation of reformed (Vedantic) Hinduism, but it did not have the historical impact of Calvin's *Institutes* for example. The latter was meant to give a summary of the message of the Bible, and be a vademecum for preachers. The Brahmo Dharma is a vademecum for Brahmo theology and

the congregational worship. There are significant differences between the two books: the *Institutes* is an explanatory book, the Brahmo Dharma purports to be scripture *as well as* explanation; the *Institutes* reached almost all reformed Christians in Europe, the Brahmo Dharma enjoyed some circulation only among adherents of Brahmoism. The importance of Brahmo Dharma lies in the indirect influence it exerted on the Hindu upper-middle classes. The Brahmo Dharma convinced many Hindu intellectuals of the time that the Upanishads and the Vedanta contained the seeds of intellectually mature reformed Hinduism.

### **Brahmo Dharma as creed and its liturgy**

Debendranath introduced important innovations in the way the Brahmo congregational worship was to be conducted. The first innovation was the fixed sequence of the liturgy of the service itself. The service was styled *brahmopāsanā*, 'worship of Brahman'. Debendranath fixed the order of the service and prescribed the standard prayers which were almost all taken from the Upanishads.<sup>24</sup> He summarised the Brahmo beliefs in a creed, which he called the *brāhma-dharma-bīja*, 'the seed of the Brahmo religion'. According to the autobiography the creed dawned upon him in his heart and he wrote the words of the creed on a piece of paper which he locked away in a box (see Auto-biography: 63; Ātmajīvanī: 89). This rather short creed, written in Sanskrit, contains four points:

- (1) There is only Brahman, the supreme divinity; this divinity created the universe.
- (2) It is the eternal, infinite, omnipresent, invisible ruler of all.
- (3) The worship of this divinity causes human welfare in this world and the next.
- (4) This worship consists of loving Him and doing the works that He loves.  
(cf. Brahmo Dharma, Bengali: [24];  
Brahmo Dharma, English: 245)

Those who wanted to be initiated into the Brahmo church had to consent to a covenant. The terms of this covenant – drawn up by Debendranath – specified that the initiate would abstain from idol-worship and sin; that the initiate would worship only Brahman, preferably daily; the initiate would yearly donate some money to the Brahmo Samaj (cf. Brahmo Dharma, Bengali: 24; Brahmo Dharma, English: 245). It is noteworthy that the covenant does not stipulate that the initiate would have to participate in the congregational services.

Society and social life are nothing without the public celebration of important stepping-stones or solemn moments in the life-cycle of its individual members. In traditional upper-caste Hindu society these moments are accompanied by *rites-de-passage*s called *samskaras*, 'purifications' or

'refinements'. These accompany the important moments in the life-cycle from birth to death. Manu enumerates 12 of them.<sup>25</sup> Debendranath did not abolish the *samskaras*. However, he reduced their number and removed any 'idolatrous' practices and references from their performance. By retaining the *samskaras* in a reformed shape, Debendranath tried to show that Brahmoism did not break with Hinduism but constitutes a modernised version of it. This is, to my mind, Debendranath's main contribution to Hindu modernity. He sought to take seriously the criticism of outsiders (mostly English Evangelicals) levelled against the existent Hindu practices. Initially convinced that the truth of Hinduism lay hidden in the Upanishads and their Advaita Vedantic interpretation by Shankara, Debendranath in the course of time moved away from this position and found his own doctrine that the pure heart open to God's influence was the real source of reformed Hinduism.

This move had theological and organisational consequences. The sphere of individual world-renunciation was now completely internalised, thus resulting in a mentality akin to the 'inner-worldly asceticism' which Max Weber posited as the essential characteristic of Western Protestantism. Those who could fully accept Debendranath's internalised world-renunciation could socially renounce the traditional Hindu world and gather in the Brahmo congregation. The Brahmo Samaj thus functioned much in the way of a traditional world-renouncing Hindu sect. This type of sect, congregation or society comprising voluntary members is the starting point of Hindu religious and social reform and thus of political change. For any social change requires a band of devoted voluntary workers who devote their time and energy to abstract ideals that transcend the immediate material self-interests of the constituting members of the band. A major problem Debendranath and his Brahmo followers could not solve is the question of wider acceptance among mainstream Hindus of the Brahmo reformation. One could argue that Debendranath's Brahmo Dharma and Brahmo Samaj contained few points of contact with popular Hinduism which lives in mythological narratives and elaborate forms of ritual worship of many different Gods and Goddesses. Debendranath's Hindu Puritanism had rejected charismatic narratives and figures which are available in abundance in Hinduism. Inspiring narrative was reintroduced in Hindu reformatory thinking with the coming of Keshub Chandra Sen.

### **Keshub Chandra Sen**

Keshub Chandra Sen (1838–84), the third great initiator of Brahmoism, made a significant impact on the urban intelligentsia in the second half of the nineteenth century, especially in the Bengal presidency. Keshub started some important trends in Brahmoism: (1) he introduced a strong element of devotion mainly through private prayer and listening to the voice of conscience; (2) he pioneered Hindu inclusivism which in his view meant embracing the founders of other great world-religions and making

a serious study of the different scriptures and of the teachings of founders of world-religions; (3) he pioneered (liberal) Hindu patriotism and nationalism; (4) he tried to bring his message to the lower strata of society; (5) he initiated a movement of Brahmo missionaries who he expected to act like world-renouncers. Keshub emphatically tried his best to enlarge his Hindu religious horizon, and thus set the pace for a tendency that is often associated with Swami Vivekananda. At the same time Keshub tried through devotionism to reconnect Brahmoism to popular Hinduism whose cults are based on personal devotion (*bhakti*) to great Hindu Gods such as Rama and Krishna or Goddesses such as Durga and Kali.<sup>26</sup> His social activism prefigures the ethos of later nationalist workers of the Indian National Congress and even of the revolutionaries of the radical nationalist movement.

### Keshub's theological innovations

Keshub joined the Brahmo Samaj in 1857. From the very beginning he understood his personal religion to consist in prayer alone. The importance of prayer led him to stress the doctrine of personal inner revelation of God's will. In this respect he followed Debendranath's idea of the foundation of Brahmo religion. But Keshub laid much more stress on the idea of conscience. In this respect Keshub seemed to have been inspired by what he knew about English Puritanism and Western Protestantism in general. Already in 1860 Keshub wrote about the efficacy of prayer as follows:

prayer forms the very gateway of faith. . . . As I ask mortal man for food because it is essential to the sustenance of my body, so I pray to my God for spiritual blessings which are essential to the sustenance of my soul.

(Basu 1940: 9)

In 1879 Keshub declared in his lecture 'Am I an Inspired Prophet?':

Prayer was my only shield and buckler, and faith the only key which I had in my hand to open the portals of heaven.

(Basu 1940: 353)

It was prayer and inspiration which in Keshub's theology made up the essence of Brahmoism, as he maintained in his lecture on 'Inspiration' of 1873:

man is said to be inspired when God breathes into him His holy spirit, and enkindles in him the fire of divine life as a response to his earnest prayers. Prayer and inspiration are the two ends of the axis round which the sphere of man's spiritual life revolves.

(Basu 1940: 296)

Inspiration is closely related to conscience in Keshub's thinking. In 1862 in a lecture entitled 'The Destiny of Human Life' Keshub said:

Conscience is the law of God engraven in golden characters on the tablet of the heart – it is REVELATION to us.

(Basu 1940: 54)

This high opinion of conscience Keshub never abandoned. In 1879 he declared:

Conscience is not a faculty. It is God Himself who speaks with dictatorial authority.

(Basu 1940: 369)

He returns to this subject again in 1882 in his book *Jeevan Veda*. In its fourth chapter 'Solitude and Detachment' he asserts: 'The two brothers Conscience and Asceticism had together set about to govern my imperfect life' (Basu 1940: 449). Chapter 6 of the same booklet is called 'Conscience'. In the Bengali original the chapter is entitled '*Vivek*', the Sanskrit term denoting the capability to distinguish between true and untrue, or permanent and ephemeral. Prayer and conscience are important in that they are the ingredients of individualistic and personal religion, that lays great emphasis on the daily internalisation of a religious consciousness and spiritual practice. This form of religion does away with external ritual and priesthood, social hierarchy, and rules and taboos concerning ritual purity. Keshub effected an almost complete Protestantisation of the Hinduism of his time, accomplishing this in a mode of typically Hindu world-renunciation.

### **Keshub's institution-building**

We have seen the ideological developments starting with the reformed Vedanta of Debendranath and moving into the more universalist and all-embracing Brahmo religion of Keshub. It now remains to take a brief look at the way Keshub's ideology influenced the organisational forms of Brahmoism. This again determined the social impact of Brahmos on late nineteenth-century Bengal.

It was clear by 1866 that Keshub represented the socially more progressive faction within Debendranath's Brahmo Samaj. The issue was, interestingly enough, the organisational form of the Brahmo Samaj and its leadership and the hierarchy within the organisation. Keshub wanted the Samaj to be organised on the basis of a constitution and did not want the Brahmo Acharya (minister), Upacharya (assistant minister) or the Adhyeta (reader) to wear any caste indications or sectarian symbols. In the same year Keshub sent out seven Brahmo missionaries who founded new Samajes in the Bengali hinterland (cf. Sivanath Sastri, *History*: 106–8; Damen 1983: 68–72,



78–83). In the subsequent years the new faction under the name 'Brahmo Samaj of India' witnessed a rapid growth. From 1865 to 1882 the number of Samajes scattered all over the Indian Empire rose from 41 to 173 (cf. Damen 1983: 97). Clearly the newly introduced Indian railways stimulated this growth (cf. Damen 1983: 98–9).

Of the three Brahmo reformers Keshub stands out as the greatest organiser and builder of institutions. None of these institutions lasted long, but this did not deter Keshub from repeatedly trying to found new ones. The earlier attempts were within the old Brahmo Samaj of Debendranath: *Brahma Vidyalyaya* or 'Calcutta Brahma School', an informal school for Brahmo theological training, in 1859 (cf. Sen 1938: 24; Basu 1940: 5ff). In 1860 followed the *Sangat Sabha*, a society for religious conversations, a more intimate version of the *Brahma Vidyalyaya* (cf. Sen 1938: 25ff). In 1863 Keshub started the *Brahma Bandhu Sabha*, 'Society of Theistic Friends'. This organisation was meant to form a bond between existing Brahmo Samajes, print and publish books on Brahmoism, promote the welfare of women, establish Brahmo schools and give public lectures on Brahmoism, establish dispensaries for medical relief (cf. Sen 1938: 43). In 1864 Keshub established the *Pratinidhi Sabha*, 'Representative Society', in order once more to consolidate the Brahmo Samajes all over the realm. This society was also meant to promote mission work and social and educational reforms (cf. Sen 1938: 47ff). After the foundation of the Brahmo Samaj of India, and Keshub had returned from his trip to England in 1870, the building of institutions was resumed: the 'Indian Reform Association' in 1870; the 'Female Normal and Adult School' in 1871 (cf. Sen 1938: 105); the 'Working Men's Institution'; the 'Industrial School'; and the 'Temperance Movement' (cf. Sen 1938: 106–8). In 1872 these were followed by the *Bharat Ashram*, 'Hermitage of India', a Brahmo monastery or 'Household of God' (cf. Sen 1938: 111–14; Damen 1983: 110–19).

In the seventies Keshub's fame had spread all over Bengal and beyond. In these years he met several important Hindu saints. The first was Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83) who founded the Arya Samaj in Bombay in 1875. They met during the Swami's stay at Calcutta in the years 1873–4. More important was Keshub's meeting in 1875 with Sri Ramakrishna, the Hindu saint and Kali priest of Dakshineshvar in North Calcutta (cf. Sen 1938: 119). This contact, unlike with Swami Dayananda, was of an intense and lasting nature (cf. Damen 1983: 188, 224, 245, 273). It is not improbable that the definite Hindu turn of late nineteenth-century Brahmoism is due to Sri Ramakrishna's universalistic Hindu spirituality (cf. Mookerjee 1976: 1–34). *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, being the English translation of diaries in Bengali kept by a follower of Sri Ramakrishna, has three chapters recording meetings between Keshub and Sri Ramakrishna.<sup>27</sup> *The Gospel* also devotes many other chapters to meetings which Sri Ramakrishna had with followers of Brahmoism (see *The Gospel of Sri Ramakrishna*, chapters 6, 9–10, 14, 32, Appendix B). These accounts portray Sri Ramakrishna

as a teacher giving counsel and advice. The influence, if any, is flowing from Sri Ramakrishna to the Brahmos, not the other way round. Keshub asks the occasional question, but most of the talking is done by Sri Ramakrishna. If we assume that these accounts are more or less faithful, we may certainly draw the conclusion that Sri Ramakrishna reinforced Keshub's Hindu leanings.<sup>28</sup> It is perhaps too far-fetched to claim that Sri Ramakrishna had an overwhelming Hinduising influence on Keshub. For many of Keshub's theological innovations predate the first meeting with Sri Ramakrishna. It is beyond doubt, however, that Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and lifestyle were regarded by many as the heights of authentic Hindu spirituality as well as relevant for the modern condition. In any case, Sri Ramakrishna exemplified to the fullest extent the importance of world-renunciation as a source of Hindu religious authority, universalism, individualism and hence of Hindu modernity. Sri Ramakrishna, more than Keshub, lived like a world-renouncer and taught the ideal of world-renunciation as the road to salvation. In spite of his connections with prominent Brahmo leaders like Keshub, Sri Ramakrishna remained an independent Hindu saint. Sri Ramakrishna's influence on Hindu modernity will be discussed later in connection with Vivekananda and Aurobindo.

Keshub had been trying to introduce a socially progressive, universalistic, liberal Hindu mentality into the Brahmo movement. He had been trying to build institutions (which did not last long). He had tried to bring Brahmoism in closer harmony with mainstream Hinduism. In the actual running of institutions along constitutional lines (as he had himself demanded when he was still associated with Debendranath), he had failed. In 1878 Keshub had consented to give his eldest daughter (aged 14) in marriage to the crown prince Nripendranarayan of the princely state of Cooch Behar in North-East India. Keshub's followers were thoroughly shocked because (1) the girl was far below the marriageable age; (2) the marriage ceremony would not be in accordance with Brahmo custom and no Brahmo minister would officiate at the ceremony.<sup>29</sup> On 15 May 1878 a large group of followers of the Brahmo Samaj of India seceded and formed a new Brahmo Samaj which they called the *Sadharan Brahmo Samaj*.<sup>30</sup> The reasons for the schism were basically twofold: (1) the Cooch Behar marriage; (2) Keshub's increasing claims to be an inspired prophet who got his messages directly from God and who therefore did not have to submit to constitutional practice and control.<sup>31</sup> The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj made a Trust Deed on 1 July 1880 in which the old principles of Rammohun's Trust Deed were repeated verbatim.<sup>32</sup>

There had been no dearth of theology of Hindu modernity. Rammohun, Debendranath and Keshub gave fundamentally new twists to its discourse. Social activism was also abundant. But the constitutional practice, the willingness to implement procedures allowing open deliberations, were yet to be internalised and put to the test. In theory everyone seemed to agree on the desirability of constitutional procedure. It had been demanded often, even by Keshub himself. The barriers to this procedure were, however, great.

Keshub had come to regard himself as an inspired messenger whose words had to be obeyed by his followers. He had more or less fallen back on the traditional Hindu concept of the religious authority of world-renouncers. He had become something of a guru. This meant charismatic leadership, not democratic constitutionalism. Keshub possessed charisma to a large degree as did the other Hindu reformers and political figures. Without democratic control mechanisms, charisma has a tendency to slip into authoritarianism. The greatest challenge of Hindu modernity was to limit charismatic authoritarian tendencies. And yet charisma is an essential feature of modernity. Charisma – the term was introduced in the social sciences by Max Weber – is a 'real innovative force of history, a force which creates new values and new attitudes to life' (Ekstrand 2000: 33). In this respect Keshub fulfilled an historical role in the development of modern Hindu values. He marks the transition from Puritan Vedantic modernity to inclusivist and universalistic Hindu modernity tilting towards Hindu cultural nationalism. Keshub brought Hindu modernity under the charismatic influence of Vaishnava devotionalism and the figure of the Mother Goddess. It was Keshub who pioneered the road that was taken by Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Swami Vivekananda. In Keshub the two opposed strands of the modern Hindu self: individualist self-realisation and collectivist Hindu self-realisation, had come into clear relief for the first time. Keshub combined the individualism of Vedanta with collectivist Hindu devotionalism. In Keshub the Vedantist individualism inspired a life of private prayer and obedience to conscience, while devotionalism – as in traditional Hindu sects – brought obedient followers under the spell and control of a charismatic world-renouncing leader/guru. If Western Protestantism influenced Hindu modernity after Keshub, it was in the sphere of theological adhortation of the individual, not in the sphere of congregational (constitutional) community building. The challenge of Hindu collectivism, of Hindu community building, was taken up by Bankim. For he was the first Hindu theoretician to imagine a national political community of all Hindus, instead of a small sectarian church with universalist pretensions.

## Notes

- 1 For details about Dvarakanath as entrepreneur see Kling (1976).
- 2 Keshub (1838–84) became the third prophet of Brahmoism, causing several schisms within the movement. He may be regarded as the real founder of modern Hindu inclusivism, a trend which is usually attributed to Sri Ramakrishna and his disciple Swami Vivekananda.
- 3 This is an important proviso as we will see later on in the chapter on Bankim.
- 4 The English translation which I quote from was made by Debendranath's son Satyendranath and his daughter-in-law Indira Debi. I note the differences with the Bengali original where necessary. In Bengali the phrase 'unreality of all things' does not occur, only the word *udās*, 'indifference'.
- 5 The Bengali *aiśvarya* can also mean 'splendour', 'magnificence'; literally it means 'the state of being lord (*iśvar*)'.

- 6 In Bengali it says *heya* which means 'to be given up'. This meaning fits better the renunciatory mood of the passage.
- 7 In Bengali it says *udās ānanda*, 'joy consisting in indifference' or 'joy of indifference', or perhaps even simply 'indifference and joy'.
- 8 For renunciation the Bengali has *audāsya*, 'indifference'.
- 9 The first point is almost universally held in Indian religious, philosophical and theological traditions throughout the centuries. The Transcendent always must be personally experienced. Religious authorities are those persons about whom the public can be truly convinced that they have experienced the Divine. The Mimamsakas and the Charvakas are probably the only exceptions in the history of Indian religions. For the Mimamsakas the Vedas themselves constitute the Transcendent, the Charvakas are sceptics who deny the Vedas, the efficacy of sacrifices and the hereafter. Yet even the Charvakas seem to belong to the core of radical individualist world-renunciation.
- 10 The translation from Sanskrit – tentative to some extent – is my own. This is not the context to discuss the philological problems of this verse from the point of view of late Vedic Sanskrit and the post-sacrificial Upanishadic theologies.
- 11 A *shraddha* is a special Hindu ceremony on behalf of a deceased person.
- 12 The ritual and ceremonial portion of Vedic literature. In fact, this portion in sheer size of texts, far outweighs the so-called *jñāna-kāṇḍa*, or wisdom portion. This portion basically comprises the ten to thirteen classical Upanishads, or minimally the ones on which Shankara wrote commentaries. In size this portion is very small. However, in the course of time these classical Upanishads acquired tremendous importance for Hindu theology and soteriology.
- 13 *Yajñas* are the elaborate large public Vedic sacrifices that were carried out outside the village or township.
- 14 I have changed the last sentence in closer accordance with the Bengali original. The English translation had 'without leaving home'. But in Bengali it simply says 'staying at home'. Debendranath never intended to become a *sannyasin* in the actual sense of the word: i.e. by physically leaving the house and become a wandering *sādhu*, 'holy man' or 'ascetic', nor did he join a renouncing sect. Debendranath internalised the ethos of renunciation.
- 15 The term *ātmya-pratyaya* seems to be a direct reference to *ātma-pratyaya*, 'experience of the self', or 'the experiencing consciousness which is the self' to be found in Mandukya Upanishad 7.
- 16 It is very doubtful that the phrase in its original context within the Mandukya can be interpreted thus. The full phrase *ekātmapratyayasāra*, can hardly mean anything but 'the essence of the experiencing consciousness which is the One Self'. The issue here is not Upanishadic philology but the way in which Debendranath read the Upanishad. Rammohun in his Bengali commentary on the Mandukya offered a monistic interpretation of this phrase: 'the one Self, controller, whose nature is consciousness' (Rāmmohan-Granthāvali, Prathama Khaṇḍa: 252; Rāmmohan Rāy, *Upaniṣad*: 117).
- 17 See Amaladass (1999) for the numerous vague conceptions of conscience within the Indian context. The closest Hindu parallel that one author can find to the Christian concept of conscience is the idea of *ātmatuṣṭi* 'self-satisfaction', or 'what is satisfactory to oneself', a term occurring in Manu II: 6.
- 18 For bibliographical details see *Brāhmadharmah, Tātparya sabita, pratham o dviṭīya khaṇḍa*. Kalikātā: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. 1975, pp. 232–5.
- 19 Christianity, and in particular Protestantism, does not abide by religious regulations regarding pure and impure foodstuffs. A Christian may eat everything. The locus classicus for this is Acts 10: 10–16. This passage describes St. Peter's vision in which he is enjoined by a heavenly voice to eat every kind of animal as there is no more ritually pure or impure. St. Paul in 1 Cor. 8: 1–13 discusses the eating of

food that was first offered to idols. The upshot is that eating or not eating makes no difference, but do not offend others by eating freely. St. Paul was of course writing about circumstances that ceased to exist once Christianity became the dominant religion in the Roman Empire of late antiquity.

20 For details see Vetter (2000: 59–61).

21 In his English translation of the Brahmo Dharma, Hemchandra Sarkar has translated *dharmajñāna* accordingly with 'conscience'. This may be questionable but given Debendranath's own explanation, 'conscience' is probably the only possible translation: Brahmo Dharma, English, p. 141.

22 Remarkably enough, the Sansad Bengali-English dictionary, the most widely used dictionary for Bengali, notes for *viveka* 'conscience' and 'judgement'. From the point of view of Sanskrit the meaning is more like 'the ability to make distinctions and choices'. Of course this older meaning gave rise to the interpretation 'conscience' which implies moral choices and distinctions between good and evil. But the latter meaning does not accord with the older semantics of the Sanskrit word.

23 A means of valid cognition renders the Sanskrit *pramāṇa*. The Nyāya Sūtra and its Bhāṣya recognise four such means: perception (*pratyakṣa*); inference (*anumāna*) based on perception and memory; comparison (*upamāna*) of known facts; statements (*śabda*, *āptavāda*) made by experts. For more details on the old Nyaya system of epistemology and logic, one can consult my *Epistemology and Spiritual Authority*. Wien: Arbeitskreis für Tibetische und Buddhistische Studien, Universität Wien, 1989, pp. 1–44. The most recent presentation of Nyaya epistemology is in Dasti and Phillips (2017: 14–37).

24 It speaks of his impact that even today the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj retained his format of the service as well as the Brahmo Dharma as spiritual handbook.

25 See *The Laws of Manu, with an Introduction and Notes*. Translated by Wendy Doniger with Brian K. Smith. Harmondsworth and Middlesex: Penguin Books, 1991, pp. 19–20.

26 For a brief discussion of the term *bhakti* turn to Chapter 3 and Hardy (1983: 25–9).

27 These diaries were kept by Mahendranath Gupta. A few years after Sri Ramakrishna's death in 1886 they were published under the title *Kathāmṛta* 'The Nectar of Words'. These diaries purport to reproduce almost verbatim the conversations Sri Ramakrishna had with many visitors in the period 1882–86. The chapters dealing with Keshub are 5, 15 and Appendix A.

28 There is always the possibility that Mahendranath Gupta's accounts are selective in the sense that he might have left out such discussions in which Sri Ramakrishna was not himself teaching but was learning something from his interlocutor.

29 For details see Sivanath Sastri. *History of the Brahmo Samaj*. 2nd edition. Calcutta: Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. Reprint 1993, pp. 173–84, 564–81.

30 For details see op. cit.: 184–6, 582–8, 611–23.

31 These main objections to Keshub are enumerated in a public statement issued by the dissidents who formed the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj. The objections are reproduced in Sivanath Sastri, *History*: 587–8.

32 The passage occurs in Sivanath Sastri, *History*: 615. The complete text of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj Trust Deed is reproduced in op. cit.: 611–23.

## 5 The narrator of militant modernity

Bankimchandra Chatterjee

### Exodus and Western modernity

The theology of Vedantic Hinduism provided the motivation towards individual self-realisation. The Brahmo Samaj became a platform for trying out egalitarian congregationalism but met with little tangible result. Even if the Samaj could inspire, it could not bring large groups of people together on a more or less permanent organisational basis. If self-realisation of the individual is to have social impact, self-realising individuals must join together to form effective collectivities. Collective Hindu self-realisation was not to be found in a Hindu church of the Western Protestant type, nor within the confines of traditional world-renouncing Hindu sects. The broadest collectivity in which group self-realisation is available is the nation-state on its way to redemption. In order to rally the people behind a collective ideal, a powerful (charismatic) story exemplifying this self-realisation could invigorate the people's imagination. The narrative of redemption needs to show the bleakness of the present condition both for the individual persons and the group to which they belong; it needs to draw attention to realisable alternatives to the present; and thus arouse hope for a better future in this very world. The political scientist Michael Walzer has shown how the Biblical story of the Exodus provided an ancient prototype and model for Western social and political revolutions, at least during the Reformation and the Enlightenment (Walzer 1985).

The Exodus story narrates how the children of Israel lived as slaves in the Egypt of the Pharaohs.<sup>1</sup> Moses, at God's command, demands the liberation of the Israelites from the hands of the Pharaoh. When the Pharaoh refuses to give in, Moses leads the Israelites out of Egypt. For 40 years they roam through the desert until they finally reach the Promised Land in Canaan. At the beginning of the journey, while still in the desert, God speaks to Moses on Mount Sinai and gives the laws by which all the Israelites must abide. God makes a covenant with all the Israelites that they will be His people and they will abide by His laws. In the Promised Land the Israelites are required to live in accordance with the covenant made on Mount Sinai.

The significant points in this story are: the deliverance from slavery in Egypt is not only possible, it is also necessary and there may be no backsliding to the old 'Egyptian' ways. The timeline of the story of the Exodus is linear, not cyclical like many other (semi-mythological) stories. The foundational myths of the Greeks like the *Odyssey* and the *Iliad* are a good example of cyclical stories. The heroes return to their original place after many adventures. But the Israelites leave Egypt and its ways, never to return there. They go some place else. They are on the move, reluctantly and with backslidings, but they keep on moving away from the past and they are learning all the time, until they arrive at their destination (which is also never final and all good) (cf. Walzer 1985: 54–5). Thus the Exodus story is a powerful metaphor of modernity itself: the irresistible movement away from the oppressive past.

The second significant point in the Exodus story is the formation of Israelite nationhood. The Israelites are asked to voluntarily join the Covenant with God, obey His Laws and live as a 'holy nation', a nation set apart from the other peoples and nations, a nation solely held together by the Laws of God revealed through Moses and by the Covenant, in a manner of speaking a 'contrat social' *avant la lettre*. Walzer has argued that the Exodus story was read and contextualised in terms of political revolution and the formation of modern nationhood. He refers to the English Puritans in the seventeenth century (cf. Walzer 1985: 52–3, 59, 78–9, 81, 89, 109) and the American revolutionaries in the eighteenth century (cf. Walzer 1985: 30, 47, 106). Protestants in the sixteenth and the seventeenth centuries often regarded themselves as undergoing the vicissitudes of the Israelite people under Moses and Aaron to reach the Promised Land of independent nationhood. In this respect, Simon Schama refers to the Dutch Protestants who regarded their revolt against Philip II as the struggle of the Israelites against the Pharaoh.<sup>2</sup> The Exodus offered a suitable metaphor of political liberation. Walzer points to the influence, even nowadays, of the Exodus metaphor on South American liberation theology (cf. Walzer 1985: 89–90, 106–7). Progress, liberty and independent nationhood are thus the message that was read and can be read in the Exodus. The fact shows the charismatic and motivational power of this particular story. Western modernity itself – intimately bound up with the Protestant mentality – is a secular Exodus, a going away from Empire, Church and the rule of aristocratic hierarchy into the Promised Land of the constitutional nation-state and democracy. Throughout his essay Walzer stresses the fact that the Western mentality has deeply internalised the Exodus story (cf. Walzer 1985: ix–xi). Also from a theological point of view the Exodus story and the law given on Mount Sinai constituted a clean break with the past. The theologian and Egyptologist Jan Assmann has stated that the Mosaic monotheism exemplified in the Exodus 'demands emigration, delimitation, conversion, revolution, a radical turning towards the new resulting from an equally radical break, abnegation, and denial of the old' (Assmann 2010: 118).

The important question to be answered in connection with Hindu modernity: is there a Hindu version of Exodus, which (1) shows a linear movement away from oppression and tradition, and (2) exemplifies Hindu/Indian (covenantal) nationhood? A question intimately related to this is: if there is a liberation-story of Hindu modernity, what means will it recommend to reach the goal of modernity? This question on the means has a direct bearing on the ethical question: how big is the role of (liberating) violence on the road towards the goal? This question is intimately linked to modernity's ambiguity; indeed the ambiguities of all utopias of modernity. In the West political revolution and liberation were never non-violent. The issue of violence has also vexed Hindu modernity, as we will see. The initiator in Hindu modernity of this issue of the legitimacy of political violence is Bankimchandra Chatterjee (1838–1894). But before we enter into this matter, we need some cultural context and background.

### **Hindu liberation story**

Hindu mythology is exceptionally rich in stories about Divine intervention on earth. The struggle between good and evil, between the Gods (*deva*) and the demons (*asura*, *daitya*) is a common theme running through the epics and the Puranas. The stories are formed on the following pattern: a demon has performed excessive self-mortification (*tapas*) and as a result receives a boon (usually invincibility or absolute power over the earth) by some deity. The demon begins to oppress the world. Usually the demon, after defeating the Gods, rules over the earth or even the whole universe. The Gods beseech a high God, usually the creator Brahma who directs them to the preserver Vishnu to come to their rescue. The high God (usually Vishnu) incarnates, fights the demons, defeats them and thus restores order.

Also the mythology around the Mother Goddess, in Sanskrit simply called *Devi*, shows a similar pattern. The earliest and shortest narrative text on the exploits of the Goddess, the *Devimahatmya*, 'The Glorification of the Goddess', depicts the Goddess when on three different occasions the Gods invoke her to rid the earth of powerful demons.<sup>3</sup> In the first episode she only enables Vishnu to do the actual battle with the two threatening demons Madhu and Kaitabha (cf. Coburn 1992: 36–9). In the second episode she is invoked by all the Gods to descend on earth and do battle with the mighty buffalo demon Mahishasura (cf. Coburn 1992: 39–52). In the third episode the Gods request her help to vanquish the two horrendous demons Shumbha and Nishumbha. These demons had robbed the Gods of all their functions and regalia (cf. Coburn 1992: 59–73). As we will see, these narratives about the Goddess's heroic battles did play a role in nineteenth-century Hindu nationalist ideology and iconography.

And yet these narratives are not linear but cyclical. After the demons are vanquished in this age, they return and haunt the earth in the next age. Vishnu descends at least ten times on earth in different shapes, among others



to destroy demons.<sup>4</sup> The Goddess intercedes three times and announces many more returns to earth for the same purpose: to defeat demons (cf. Coburn 1992: 77–8). Divine restoration of order never lasts forever. This fact could be regarded as wisdom – sad, worldly and conservative but nevertheless very empirically true – evil cannot be uprooted once and for all, for evil is part of the constitution of the world. Therefore it always returns in due time. Even God cannot crush evil definitively. The cyclical nature of evil, the eternal return of evil, is also simply part of the cyclical nature of the Hindu cosmos. Everything in the social cosmos takes place in beginning-less and never-ending cycles: the year, the seasons, day and night, the daily rituals, the life-crisis rituals, re-incarnation, etc. The social aspect of the Hindu cosmos is bound in cyclical time. Gods and demons come and go in an endless sequence. This is the basic concept of traditional Hindu society. In order to radically break out of this interminable chain, there is the sphere of world-renunciation in which time is radically changed from cyclical to linear. A Hindu liberation story situated within Hindu society thus needs to be told from the perspective of linear time, the time-perspective of renunciation: time with a beginning and an end. This linear time-perspective is what Hindu renunciation and the Exodus story have in common. Such a perspective promises that human action leads to a goal from which there is no risk of reverting to the old situation.

The big difference between Hindu renunciation and the Exodus – the latter also implied a renunciation of sorts, namely renouncing the slave-existence in Egypt – is numbers. Hindu world-renunciation is an individual choice. It is done by an individual person. In many respects, renunciation is the only way to become an individual person at all. The world-renouncer may join a sect (such as the Buddhist sangha or a Vaishnava sampradaya), but he or she remains an individual who voluntarily renounces the Hindu world of social hierarchy. Exodus, by contrast, is the *collective* renunciation of the past. Exodus is about a whole people, a nation, that strives for ‘self-realisation’ as an independent country. Obviously, the Hindu reformer cum nationalist in the latter half of the nineteenth century will have been confronted with a problem like this: how to make people as a collectivity renounce tradition and foreign oppression? How to bring about Hindu/Indian national consciousness? How to link the ethos of individualistic world-renunciation with collective national liberation? Or put differently: which narrative blends individual renunciation, linear time and the collectivity of the Hindu nation in the way Exodus did for the Israelites?

Although Keshub had set the tone of Hindu patriotism, it was the Bengali writer Bankimchandra Chatterjee who succeeded in producing a narrative that showed the road to national (Hindu) liberation. It is generally accepted wisdom in the history of modern Bengali literature that Bankim was the first to produce mature novels in Bengali. He began his writing career with a novel in English which remained unfinished.<sup>5</sup> He did not entirely abandon

writing in English, but for literary purposes he perfected his ability to write in Bengali. Between 1865 and 1893 he published a string of Bengali novels.

The most important and famous one, from the point of view of Hindu modernity and nationalism, is the novel *Anandamath*, 'The Abbey of the Monks', published in 1882.<sup>6</sup> This novel presented a modern Hindu narrative of national liberation, comparable in impact to the Exodus story. *Anandamath* became one of the most important sources of inspiration for Hindu revolutionary nationalists in the first decades of the twentieth century.

Thus the social setting of modernity in its nationalistic manifestation owed a great deal to the internalisation of a narrative rather than an ideology alone. In other words, modernity needs a story in order to mould history. Modernity encompasses aesthetics as well as ethics.<sup>7</sup> For the idea of (national) modernity to have the power to mobilise people, to 'call' them to nationalistic action, an ideal-typical narrative is extremely helpful.<sup>8</sup> How did *Anandamath* fulfil all the mentioned requirements? The answer lies in the content of the novel.

### *Anandamath*

The story is woven around the experiences of its main characters: Mahendra, an impoverished landowner and his wife Kalyani; Satyananda, the leader of the Sannyasi rebels; Jibananda, a commander of the rebel army and his wife Shanti; Bhavananda, second in command after Satyananda. Bankim sets the story in the year 1769. A terrible famine ravages Bengal. In spite of this, the Nawab (the semi-independent Mughal governor) raises heavy taxes which he faithfully delivers to the British in Calcutta. Driven by near-starvation, Mahendra, his wife Kalyani and their baby daughter leave their ancestral home for the city in the hope of some food. On the way Kalyani and her daughter are kidnapped by highway robbers. Mahendra is taken prisoner by sepoys (Indian soldiers) of the East India Company. Both Mahendra and his wife are separately saved by the Sannyasi rebels and brought to the hide-out in a deserted Buddhist monastery, deep in the jungle. The Sannyasis in Bankim's narrative form a closely knit army of *santāns* (Bengali and Sanskrit, meaning 'sons'), of the Mother Goddess who is also identified with the land, the country of Bengal. The *santān*-army of Hindu world-renouncers has vowed to defeat the Nawab. They are trying to accomplish this in various battles and are ready to even do battle with the British. In order to finance their military campaigns, the *santāns* rob the money transports of the Nawab to the British in Calcutta. In the course of the adventures Mahendra joins the *santāns* and turns his house into a fortress and an arms factory. In a final battle the *santāns* even defeat an army under British command, and thus the *santāns* have become the rulers of North Bengal. At this juncture Satyananda, the supreme commander of the *santāns*, is called back by a mysterious physician who asks him to renounce

further military action and leave the rule over Bengal in the hands of the British.

This, in a bare outline, constitutes the story of *Anandamath*. The story already answers an important question regarding the road towards Hindu modernity: the road leads to the goal via politically motivated violence and revolutionary war. As we will see in the section on Bankim's Hindu liberation theology, the choice for a violent road to reach modernity partly determined Bankim's preference for the Bhagavad Gita as a scriptural canon for Hindu modernity.

Throughout the narrative of *Anandamath*, the *santāns* almost always win their battles against the troops of the Nawab and the British, even though at the price of many casualties. As far as the main drift of the plot is concerned, the *santāns* stage a successful rebellion and defeat their enemies. In this respect *Anandamath* carries a powerful message of collective Hindu self-liberation. For the *santāns* were close to establishing their own independent kingdom. At the zenith of his victory, Satyananda, the military leader of the *santāns*, is advised to renounce further action against the British. The mysterious physician tells him:

If the English do not rule, there is no possibility of the renewed emancipation of the eternal religion (*sanātān dharma*). . . . The worship (*pūjā*) of three hundred and thirty million deities is not the eternal religion. . . . What the *mlecchas* [barbarians or non-Hindus] call Hindu religion (*hindu-dharma*) is lost. Genuine Hindu religion consists in knowledge, not in action. This knowledge is of two kinds: of outer things and of inner things. The knowledge of inner things is the chief part of the eternal religion. But if the knowledge of outer things does not first arise, the knowledge of inner things cannot arise. . . . The English are extremely adept in knowledge of outer things . . . but as long as the Hindus are not again full of knowledge, virtue (*guṇ*) and power (*bal*), English rule will stay forever.

(Bankim Rachanabali I: 643)

The doctor explains to Satyananda (to the latter's dismay) that the only purpose of the *santāns* was to destroy Muslim rule. Muslim rule refers to the rule of the Nawab who was nominally the governor of Bengal on behalf of the Mughal emperor whose capital was Delhi. But the British are destined to rule India for some time. The Hindus should learn material sciences from the British. This will enable the Hindus to restore eternal religion, the real Hinduism which consists in spiritual knowledge. British rule will last until the Hindus have become wise, worthy and strong. The road to Hindu modernity runs via war with the past and via temporary acceptance of a subjugated present. This remarkable turn-about in the narrative has baffled later critics. In the opinion of Sisir Kumar Das, Bankim was 'a peculiar man, complex, unpredictable and enigmatic' (Das 1996: 162). He calls this

book 'a strange combination of glowing patriotism and yet of docile surrender' (Das 1996: 162). If Bankim had wanted 'to defend' British rule with this book, he obviously 'failed' (op. cit.: 162). Kaviraj, by contrast, seems to imply that Bankim breaks off a narrative at a crucial point in order to balance between historical factual time (what really happened) and an indeterminate future (in which history can probably change) (cf. Kaviraj 1995: 133). Kaviraj notes that in Bankim's narratives of final battles,

the war ends in a victory of the army of the people – of the armies of Rajsinha, Satyananda, Devi and Sitaram, led by their popular leaders. After victory, . . . in each case, something inexplicable happens . . . their leaders turn to an uncharacteristic domesticity or exile . . . on the weak excuse that 'the time' has not yet come.

(Kaviraj 1995: 147)

Kaviraj explains this 'excuse' as 'conditioned' 'acquiescence' with the contemporary colonial situation. Conditionality opens up the possibility of political renegotiation (cf. Kaviraj 1995: 147). Lipner, however, reads Bankim's intentions quite differently, 'as if it is in the power of the Indians to be kingmakers, and confer a temporary dominion upon the British to enable an Indian national objective to triumph'. And furthermore for Bankim the 'ulterior Indian objective was . . . the incarnation of the Hindu Eternal Code in the emergent nation-state' (Lipner 2005: 73). This seems to tally with Bankim's long-term vision of India as a modernised Hindu nation.<sup>9</sup> The role of revolutionary violence on the way to modernity seems transient. In the end, the spiritual knowledge of the eternal Hindu religion will triumph. This means that in Bankim's view violence in Hinduism is acceptable or a necessary evil.

As is clear from the physician's pronouncements: genuine Hindu religion, the eternal religion, consists in the knowledge of inner things, not in the outward worship of millions of deities. Eternal inner religion is the lofty goal that needs to become incarnate in the modernised Hindu nation. *Anandamath* in the early twentieth century was one of the narratives motivating militant nationalist revolt against British rule. The reason for singling out this novel as a revolutionary liberation narrative lies not only in the possibility of political renegotiation but in the resonance of real historical events that formed the basis of *Anandamath*'s narrative. Hindu revolutionaries recognised political possibilities in the *Anandamath* story which were not so prominently visible in Bankim's other historical novels. *Anandamath* possessed the immediacy of real history that was not far removed from living memory. Underlying it all is the implicit message that violence is permitted if it secures irreversible change for the better. That is why *Anandamath* tells a story that is not cyclical. Its linear narrative implies irreversible developments. The attraction of *Anandamath* lies in its handling of 'historical' sources on violent rebellion; and coupling this narrative to the new evocative

imagery of the country as the Goddess and the Goddess as the country. But first the historical sources.

### **The historical Sannyasi Rebellion**

Traditional Hinduism had its own forms of socio-political violence which was often associated with world-renunciation, for world-renouncers stand outside the Brahminical social order that restricts the use of violence to the ruling classes. Renunciation was the traditional method to resolve social and political tensions. Thus the eighteenth-century sannyasi rebellions do not come as a surprise. In 1772 groups of fifty thousand or more sannyasis and fakirs came over Lower Bengal, plundering and ravaging. Because of famines a few years earlier and due to general poverty many starving peasants had joined these bands of world-renouncers. Sepoys under British command were called in to quell the rebellion. They were unsuccessful. One Captain Thomas actually lost his life in the operations. The incursions of these bands of sannyasis came to be known as the 'Sannyasi Rebellion' (sources such as Warren Hastings's letters and a passage from W. W. Hunter's 'Annals of Rural Bengal' are quoted in full in Bandyopadhyay 1993: 88–92). In fact, this event was not a one-time happening but lasted for 40 years, roughly from 1760 to 1800. In reality this Rebellion was a long series of skirmishes, over which the East India Company prevailed in the end (cf. Pinch 1996: 24–5). These sannyasis or monks (as Pinch consistently calls them) belonged to various Vaishnava sects. They were organised in monastic armies, *akharas*, and were bearing arms. Warren Hastings wanted to tackle the problem of the continuous sannyasi skirmishes and consequently in 1773 banished all armed sects from the provinces of Bengal and Bihar save those that 'employ themselves' quietly 'in their religious function' (Pinch 1996: 26).

Especially the Vaishnava Gosains and Bairagis in the eighteenth century wielded much military, economic and political influence in Northern India and Bengal. What the social history of the period shows is that world-renunciation fostered military prowess.<sup>10</sup> The mentality associated with world-renunciation, namely abandoning all social ties and conventions, has at its peak the willingness to abandon life itself. This is the mentality of the saint as well as the warrior. Bankim was aware of this mentality and used it extensively in *Anandamath*. He knew the history of the 'Sannyasi Rebellion' itself very well and quoted the relevant sources in full in the third edition (1886) of his novel (cf. Bandyopadhyay 1993: 88–92).

### **Wasudev Balwant Phadke**

The second historical source of *Anandamath* has been discovered in 1966 by the editor of the commemorative edition of *Anandamath*, Chittaranjan Bandyopadhyay. In July 1879 the Maharashtrian Brahmin Wasudev Balwant Phadke (1845–83) was arrested by British police in the Kaladgi District in

the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad. Since February 1879 Phadke had been organising and leading a gang of Ramoshis (a backward community in Maharashtra) to commit dacoities (highway robberies). The purpose was to collect money with which to start an armed insurrection against British rule in India (Source Material, Vol. I, 1957: 73–7). Phadke's group robbed rich merchants, mostly in remote villages (cf. op. cit.: 122).

Phadke left both an autobiography and a diary running from February to May 1879 when he was actively engaged in raiding the wealthy for his political cause. From the diary it is clear that he explained his political intentions to the villagers. At one village he compared himself to a small child who cannot yet lift up two maunds (around 60 to 70 kg) of water. But a man of 25 can. Similarly Phadke needs 25 years to grow strong enough to overthrow 'English Government' (op. cit.: 121). About his motivations Phadke wrote openly in his autobiography. He had witnessed terrible famines in Western India in 1876–77. He was convinced that they were caused by British rule. In his autobiography he also notes the high salaries British Imperial officials touch as compared to the meagre incomes of Indians (cf. Bandyopadhyay 1993: 61). 'Whose is this money that they [i.e. the British] draw! Is this their father's money? Is it got for nothing?', Phadke exclaims. Then he continues:

Thinking day and night of this and of the thousands of other miseries, my mind has been wholly bent on the downfall of the British power. I thought of nothing else. I could not even sleep without the idea about the overthrow of the Empire. . . .

I learnt how to fire, ride, and fencing, and also to spear etc. I was very fond of arms. I always used to have in my possession two or three guns, four or five swords. . . . My first duty was to rouse the minds of the people against the English.

(Bandyopadhyay 1993: 61–2)

Phadke's ultimate goal was 'the establishment of the Republic' (Bandyopadhyay 1993: 62).

After his arrest Phadke was charged with collecting arms 'with the intention' to 'wage war against the Queen' (Indian Penal Code 121A); 'exciting feelings of disaffection to the Government' (Indian Penal Code 124A), and 'committing dacoity' (Indian Penal Code 400) (cf. Source Material, Vol. I, 1957: 76–7). On these charges he was convicted and sentenced to incarceration for life. He was not sent to the Andamans – the usual place for political convicts – but instead in January 1880, he was sent to Aden. In October 1880 he successfully escaped from the Aden prison but was soon recaptured and put back in jail with fetters around his ankles (Source Material: 79–80).

Already in 1879, the year of his arrest, Phadke had gained wide fame as the newspapers in British India covered his story. On the whole the papers

compared him with Shivaji, Dean Tucker (of the American Revolution) and even George Washington (cf. Source Material: 126–8). The *Amrita Bazar Patrika* (English daily from Calcutta) of 13 November 1879 compared Phadke also with Washington, but added to the list of historical freedom fighters William Wallace, Wilhelm Tell and Garibaldi (cf. Bandyopadhyay 1993: 60).

How could Bankim have known about Phadke? The first obvious source is the editorial in the *Amrita Bazar Patrika*. Bandyopadhyay quotes it in full in his edition of *Anandamath* (Bandyopadhyay 1993: 60–3). He assumes that Bankim as a regular reader of this paper, must have taken notice of this editorial (Bandyopadhyay 1993: 18). But there is much more. Phadke's autobiography had been translated – presumably from the English translation from the Marathi original – into Bengali in January 1880 by Dakshinacharan Chattopadhyay, editor and publisher of the Bengali newspaper *Samachar Chandrika*.<sup>11</sup> Bandyopadhyay indicates that more Bengali papers in that year carried news about Phadke's arrest (op. cit.: 17–18). Bandyopadhyay assumes that Bankim knew the story from the *Samachar Chandrika* and the Bengali translation of Phadke's autobiography. As proof of Bankim's acquaintance with the Phadke story, Bandyopadhyay refers to *Anandamath* itself (Bandyopadhyay 1993: 19). This, of course, is a circular argument. Nevertheless, the fact that Phadke was news in 1879–80 is not in doubt. The easy availability of Phadke's autobiography in Bengali and the date of its publication – just prior to the appearance of the first chapters of *Anandamath* in the Chaitra issue, 12th number, of the journal *Bangadarshan* in early 1880 – lends credence to Bandyopadhyay's inference.<sup>12</sup>

Even if the proof of the adaptation of the Phadke story in *Anandamath* cannot be found, the resemblances are interesting. Phadke was disgusted with British rule, he did gather men around him to start a guerrilla war against the British, and he did loot village magnates in order to finance the operations. This is also the scenario found in *Anandamath*. Phadke was a Hindu and so were his followers. The main protagonists of *Anandamath* are also Hindus. But there are differences as well. Phadke is not credited with wishing to establish a purely Hindu republic. Phadke did not preach Hinduism. The *santāns* in *Anandamath* are driven by a particular Hindu ideology, the doctrine of *anushilan* (to which we will turn later) and they worship the Goddess Durga as a symbol of the Hindu nation.

The relationship between the Sannyasi Rebellion and *Anandamath* remains somewhat thin. Even though the Sannyasis were Hindu world-renouncers, they did not fight the British to establish a Hindu kingdom. Their armed exploits were inspired by hunger, not by Hindu religio-political ideology. Bankim used the Sannyasi Rebellion as a convenient historical setting, thus concealing his real sources: perhaps the Phadke rebellion. Both historical sources, in the end, are mere theatrical props with which Bankim creates his own history: that of successful collective Hindu self-liberation. That *Anandamath* was not a historical but a 'patriotic' novel was patently

clear to Bankim's contemporaries. That in *Anandamath* patriotism was a form of Hindu religion was also duly noticed. An editorial in Keshub's newspaper 'The Liberal and the New Dispensation' in 1883 remarks about *Anandamath*:

Could patriotism in any shape prosper without religion? The author [i.e. Bankim] has given a religious mask to the whole plot; he has represented God not only as the lover of the men but as the Destroyer of the infidel; and in doing so he has shown his usual sagacity. For in India nothing can succeed which is not religious.

(Bandyopadhyay 1993: 79)

### The nation as Goddess

In *Anandamath* Bankim effected an explosive blend of Hindu religion – or more precisely Hindu Protestant ethic – and patriotism – in more appropriate parlance: anti-colonial nationalism. How exactly did he do this? For an answer we must turn to a crucial passage in *Anandamath* itself.

The tenth chapter of part one of the novel narrates a scene in which Mahendra is just rescued by the *santāns* from the sepoys under British command. Mahendra is sitting with Bhavananda, one of the commanders of the *santān* army. It is night, the moon is shining brightly over a vast landscape. The two are resting and watching the scenery.

Gazing at the beauty of the vast earth swimming in moonlight, full of peace, and strewn with forests, mountain-streams and rivers, Bhavananda felt a special gladness in his heart. It was as if the ocean laughed in the rising moon. He smiled and began to speak in friendly tones. He was very eager to start a conversation. He made many efforts, but Mahendra did not say a word. Bhavananda gave up and began to sing to himself:

I praise the Mother (*vande mātaram*),  
Sweet are her waters, sweet are her fruits;  
She is cooling as sandel-wood [or: cooling as the South wind],  
Dark green with crops,  
The Mother;

Listening to the song, Mahendra was a little surprised, he could not understand anything of it. 'Sweet are her waters, sweet are her fruits; cooling as sandel-wood, dark green with crops; which mother is that?' he asked.

Without answering Bhavananda continued the song:  
Her nights are filled with splendid moonlight and joy,



Her trees and plants shine with blossoms and flowers,  
 She smiles sweetly, her language is mellifluous,  
 She gives happiness, she gives boons,  
 The Mother;

Mahendra said, 'But this is a country, not the Mother'. Bhavananda said, 'We do not recognise any other Mother' – 'the mother and the place of birth are more important even than heaven itself'.<sup>13</sup> We say that the Mother is the place of birth, we do not have a mother, no father, no brothers, no friends – no wife, no son, no room, no house; we only have Her 'with sweet waters', 'with sweet fruits', 'cooling as the West wind carrying the fragrance of sandel-wood', 'dark green with crops'.

Then Mahendra understood and said, 'in that case, sing it again'.

(Baṅkim Racanāvalī, I: 589–90)

Bhavananda repeats the first nine lines of the poem and then continues with the rest.<sup>14</sup>

You are formidable with loud noise of seventy million voices,  
 You hold sharp swords in twice seventy million arms,<sup>15</sup>  
 Why, Mother, with so much power are you weak?

To her who maintains many armies,  
 I bow, to her who saves,  
 Who wards off hosts of enemies,  
 The Mother.

You are knowledge, you are religion (*dharma*);  
 You are the heart and its core;  
 You are the life-breaths in the body.  
 You, Mother, are the strength (*śakti*) in the arms;  
 In our hearts, Mother, you are devotion (*bhakti*);  
 It is your image, Mother, that we are making  
 In every temple (*mandir*),  
 For you are Durgā,<sup>16</sup> carrying ten weapons;  
 You are Kamalā,<sup>17</sup> treading on lotus-petals;  
 You are Vāṇī,<sup>18</sup> giver of knowledge.  
 I bow to you.  
 I bow to Kamalā,  
 The spotless, the incomparable one.  
 Sweet are her waters, sweet are her fruits,  
 The Mother.  
 I praise the Mother,  
 She is dark green, she is sincere,  
 She smiles sweetly, she is bejewelled,

She is earth who nourishes,  
The Mother.

(Bankim Racanāvalī, I: 590)

In this poem in mixed language Bankim makes Bhavananda express the ambiguity of modern Indian patriotism.<sup>19</sup> It is based on Hindu religious ideology; it uses a popular Hindu divinity to symbolise the nation; the devotion, the *bhakti*, to this divinity equals the Western concept of patriotism; the language that describes this symbol is both local (Bengali) and Hindu universal (Sanskrit); thus the poem mixes the local Bengali level with a pan-Indian Brahmanised Sanskritic level. The choice of the Goddess seems to be typically Bengali Hindu, and yet the number of arms of this Goddess – seventy million – seems not to exclude Bengali Muslims.<sup>20</sup> The Mother is no other than Durga, the main fighting Goddess of the Devimahatmya. She is also Lakshmi – Goddess of wealth – and Sarasvati, Goddess of learning and science. These three symbolise the needs of the Hindu/Indian nation: military prowess, material wealth, modern science. At the same time the Mother also represents the riverine earth of Bengal itself: rich fertile soil yielding fruits and harvests. The powers of the Mother Goddess lie in the hands of her sons, the human inhabitants of Bengal. She can rouse the nation with seventy million voices and defend the country with twice as many weapons. Bankim had created a powerful icon of national regeneration, an icon that should arouse strong feelings of *bhakti*, devotion, both for the supreme divinity and the land. The *bhakti* element could appeal to traditional Hindus, the national regeneration element would appeal to Hindu modernisers, such as the followers of among others Keshub. The Goddess imagery is further elaborated in the scene that follows immediately in the *Vande Matarāṃ* episode. Bankim thus illustrates once more the symbol of the poem by explicit descriptions of the Goddess and what she is supposed to represent.

At dawn the leader of the *santāns*, Satyananda, is taking Mahendra into the temples of the monastery. The first hall of the temple is dark. Mahendra can barely distinguish a large statue (*mūrti*) representing Vishnu cutting off the heads of the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. On his left is Lakshmi, on his right is Sarasvati, on his lap is a Goddess of incomparable beauty. Satyananda explains to Mahendra that she is the ‘Mother’ of the *santāns* (cf. Bankim Racanāvalī, I: 592–3). In another room Satyananda shows Mahendra the Goddess as she *was*: the form Jagaddhatri, the ‘supportress of the living world’.<sup>21</sup> She tamed the wild animals of the jungle such as elephants and lions. Mahendra salutes the *mātṛbhūmi*, the motherland. This Goddess symbolises the times when the jungle was gradually being cleared for agricultural purposes. In another dark room Satyananda shows the Mother as she *has become* now: Kali, the dark naked Goddess wearing a garland of skulls. This is because ‘now everywhere in the country there are cremation-grounds’ (op. cit.: 593). She is trampling on her own Shiv (a pun on the word *śiva*, the God Shiva, her husband, as well as ‘well-being’). In her

hands she has a skull and a club. Satyananda explains: 'We are the *santāns*, and we have just recently given weapons into the hands of the Mother' (op. cit.: 593). Satyananda is taking Mahendra outside. There is a marble temple showing the Mother as she *will be*: a golden image with ten arms outstretched in ten directions.<sup>22</sup> She has many powers (*śakti*) symbolised by many weapons. She has trampled her enemies underfoot. At her feet lies the heroic lion who is also engaged in destroying the enemies of the Goddess. To her right is Lakshmi, to her left is Sarasvati, joined by Karttikeya, the God of war; and Ganesha, the fulfiller of all undertakings (op. cit.: 593).

Bankim describes here the traditional arrangement of the Goddess Durga with lion, the other two Goddesses and the two male Gods. This arrangement is built in clay for the Durga Puja festival. Bankim reinterprets the traditional Durga festival imagery in terms of nation and its cult of patriotism, or *bhakti* for the land. This idea of motherhood of the supreme God in the context of nation-building was also expressed by Keshub a year before *Anandamath*. In 1879 Keshub issued a 'Proclamation' in English put in the mouth of the Mother Goddess:

Infidelity in every form, sensuality, untruth, pride . . . and all false systems of worship prevalent in the land are my enemies. Against these level your united force, and crush them with your mighty prayers. . . . As ye destroy my foes, proclaim my name and establish my throne. Tell all people to come direct to me, without a mediator or an intercessor, and accept me as their Mother. The influence of the earthly mother at home and of the queen mother at the head of the Government will raise the hearts of my Indian children to the Supreme Mother.

(Basu 1940: 371–2)

The ideological/theological ingredients of Bankim's Mother as the nation symbolism are present here as well. The supreme deity is regarded as a Mother Goddess; this Goddess fights against her enemies using her worshippers as instruments. In Bankim the Mother has twice seventy million weapons. It is an interesting shift from the queen mother to a national Goddess Mother who embraces all her Indian children – in Bankim called *santāns*. Keshub, of course, was wholly loyal to the British queen. His imagery and theology of liberal Hindu patriotism did not need much to transform into an anti-British and anti-colonial icon. The imagery could easily stay intact, it only took the British element – inessential to the imagery anyway – to be removed to accomplish this transformation. Obviously, Keshub wanted to seem very loyal to the British with this imagery. He did not foresee, nor did perhaps Bankim, how much the same imagery would turn against the British. That Keshub was not influenced by Bankim in this passage, but groped towards a Mother Goddess symbolism very similar to Bankim's is clear from the fact that Keshub began to refer to God as Mother already in 1872 (cf. Basu 1940: 285).

The song *Vande Mataram*, however, was composed quite early. It was written five years before it appeared in *Anandamath*. Sisir Kumar Das thinks the song was written around 1875 and was meant to fill a blank page in the magazine *Bangadarshan*. As the proof-reader did not like it, Bankim simply kept it and later inserted it into *Anandamath* (cf. S.K. Das 1996: 240). The poem might have been inspired by a Bengali poem by Satyendranath Tagore (son of Debendranath) written in 1872. This is suggested by Bankim scholar Amitrasudan Bhattacharya (1991: 201). The lines quoted by Bhattacharya show that Satyendranath describes India in female terms: *phalavatī*, *vasumatī*, *srotasvatī*, *puṇyavatī*, ‘yielding fruits, full of riches, with flowing waters, full of virtues’. Moreover, the inhabitants of India are called *santān* also in this poem (op. cit.: 201). Also Bhattacharya believes that *Vande Mataram* was written around 1875 and he adds a little anecdote told by Purnachandra, the then manager of *Bangadarshan*. Someday Purnachandra saw a paper with the text of *Vande Mataram* lying on Bankim’s desk. He wanted Bankim to give the poem for publication as he thought it good. Bankim refused and is supposed to have said: ‘whether it is good or bad, you cannot know now. You will know in the future – I may not be alive then, you may be’ (op. cit.: 332). Lipner refers to these anecdotes but concludes that the ‘genesis of the hymn is unclear’ (2005: 86). Like many others, he also notes the similarity between *Vande Mataram* and an earlier piece by Bankim (2005: 86–9).

Bankim had used the Durga symbol in around the same time in an essay of his comical series *Kamalākānter Daptar*, ‘From the Desk of Kamalakanta’. The essay in question was called ‘*āmār Durgotsav*’, ‘my Durga festival’. It appeared in October 1874 in *Bangadarshan*. In this remarkable piece Bankim makes Kamalakanta sing the praises of the Mother Goddess of Bengal.

I was terribly lonely – and because I was lonely, I began to get frightened – terribly lonely – without mother, I was crying ‘Mother, mother’. I went to the ocean of time to find the mother. Where is Mother, where is my Mother? Where is the Bengali soil, the progenitrix of Kamalākānta! Where in this dark ocean of the present are you? Suddenly the holes of my ears were filled with heavenly music – the horizon was flooded with light as of sunrise, like glowing iron – a delightful gentle wind was blowing – and there on that undulating surface of water I saw Her – bedecked with gold, the autumnal image of [the Durgā form worshipped on] the seventh day (*saptamī*). On the water she was laughing, floating, radiating light! Is this Mother? Yes, this is Mother! I realized this was my mother (*jananī*), the land of my birth (*janmabhūmi*) – this was she who consists in earth (*mṛnmayī*), who has the form of earth (*mṛttikā – rūpiṇī*) – she who is decorated with endless jewels – at present hidden in the womb of time.<sup>23</sup> Her ten arms bedecked with jewels – the ten cardinal points of space – extended in all ten directions, and they

were adorned with many different (*nānā*) powers (*śakti*) in the form of many different weapons; at her feet the heroic lions who have crushed enemies and are engaged in squashing enemies! But this form I will not see now – today I will not see it, tomorrow I will not see it – unless I cross the stream of time, I will not see it – but one day I will see it – with her arms in all directions, striking with many different weapons, crushing the enemies, dallying on the backs of the chiefs of heroes (*vīrendra*) – to her right is Lakṣmī (wealth) of happy form, to her left is Vāṇī (Speech, name of Sarasvatī), in the form of knowledge (*vidyā*) and learning (*vijñān*); together with her are Kārtikeya symbolising strength, and Gaṇeś symbolising success in actions, in the middle of the stream of time there, I saw this golden image (*pratimā*) of Bengal!

From where I got flowers, I cannot say – but I offered a handful at the feet of that image – I cried out ‘O you who are full of wealth (*sarvamāṅgalye*), auspicious one (*śive*), you will procure all the things I need (*sarvārthasādhike*), you protect your countless children (*santān*), you give religion, riches, happiness and suffering! Accept my flower offering (*puṣpāñjali*) . . . come Mother, come into our houses – [from now it seems Kamalākānta speaks in the plural for all Bengalis] we are sixty million of your children (*santān*) gathered here.

I began to call Her, ‘O mother, rise up (*uṭho*), golden land of Bengal, rise up mother! This time we will be good children, we will stay on the right path – we will save your honour (*mukh rākhibo*). Rise up mother, Goddess (*devi*) you are favoured by the gods – this time we will forget ourselves – we will love our brothers, we will do good to others – irreligion, laziness and devotion to the senses (*indriyabhakti*) we will renounce. . .

rise up, rise up, rise up, mother (*jananī*) of Bengal!  
The mother did not rise up. Will she not rise up?

Come brothers, let us jump into this dark stream of time. Come, with our hundred and twenty million arms we will lift up that image (*pratimā*), and while carrying it on sixty million heads, let us bring it into our house.

(Bankim Racanāvalī II: 80)

There can be little doubt that this passage contains in prose the same view on the Goddess Durga as the Mother of Bengal as we find in *Vande Mataram*. The only significant difference is the number of arms of the Goddess. In Kamalakanta’s text she has sixty million, in *Vande Mataram* seventy million.<sup>24</sup> The Kamalakanta piece is a preliminary study of *Vande Mataram*. The exhortations of this piece are, however, much stronger than in the *Vande Mataram* hymn. For here Kamalakanta/Bankim wants all Bengalis to improve themselves morally: ‘this time we will forget ourselves – we will love our brothers, we will do good to others – irreligion, laziness and

devotion to the senses we will renounce'. Then the Bengalis have to take their own destiny into their hands by: 'carrying [the Goddess Durga cum golden Bengal] on sixty million heads', and bring her 'into our house'. There is nothing passive or inactive about the Kamalakanta passage. The Bengalis do not only have to invoke a Goddess and then wait and see what happens. They have to actively bring her into their own homes and lives. Here Bankim describes the process of nation-building at its most essential, namely the internalisation of the idea of the nation (the Goddess). This has to be effected with great devotion and individual exertion on the part of all the inhabitants of Bengal, including the Muslims, as the number of sixty million indicates. The Kamalakanta piece shows that Bankim regarded the Durga of the Durga Puja as the most appropriate symbol of the new nation in the making.

In *Anandamath*, Bankim deepened the scope of this Goddess symbolism into a theology of female images. A closer analysis will reveal that Bankim again used the Durga Puja as a starting point. During the Puja the sacred text of the Devimahatmya is often being recited in full. We have briefly referred to the stories of this text in an earlier section of this chapter. Let us now turn to the imagery which Bankim adopted from the Devimahatmya. He did not make elaborate use of this text, unlike the extensive use he made of the Bhagavad Gita in his theological thought. But it falls within the scope of our discussion of Hindu modernity to indicate how Bankim might have reread the Devimahatmya.<sup>25</sup>

In the first image of *Anandamath* the Goddess is lying in the lap of Vishnu. In front, it says, are the blood-spattered heads of Madhu and Kaitabha (Devimahatmya I: 68–77). The Goddess in the lap is called by the hermit the 'mother whose children we all are' (translation Kaviraj 1995: 138). The hermit says 'say, Hail Mother (*Bande Mataram*)' (op. cit.). This image is based on the first episode of the Devimahatmya in which the Goddess called by the name *Yoganidra* is invoked by Brahma and because she arises out of the sleeping Vishnu, the latter is able to defeat the demons Madhu and Kaitabha. In fact she does not slay them herself. The next image in Bankim's scene is the Goddess as the mother of the universe (*Jagaddhatri*). Bankim makes the hermit say about her: 'She had tamed the animals of the forests, the elephants and the lions, and in their habitat she had established her own abode' (Kaviraj 138). The relation with the second episode of the Devimahatmya in which the Goddess defeats the buffalo-demon Mahishasura is not very explicit but seems to be understood. Chapter III of the Devimahatmya describes the battle between the Goddess and the army of Mahishasura. His general Chamara rides an elephant: both are killed by the Goddess (Devimahatmya III: 10–16). Mahishasura himself assumes the form of a lion and this form is destroyed by the Goddess as well (Devimahatmya III: 29).

Another veiled reference to the Devimahatmya in *Anandamath* is the image of the Goddess as she is now: this is the Goddess Kali. Kali appears in the third episode of the Devimahatmya, chapter VII: 6 onwards. In that chapter Kali slays the demons Chanda and Munda. In chapter VIII, Kali

helps to slay the demon Raktabija whom the other 'mothers' cannot slay. From chapter IX onwards, the Goddess Durga fights alone with the two main demons and their armies and slays Nishumbha. In the last part she slays Shumbha in a direct confrontation without armies.

Kali in *Anandamath* refers to the third episode of the Devimahatmya. The demons Shumbha and Nishumbha and Raktabija could very well symbolise the present colonial repressors, i.e. the British. Shumbha and Nishumbha defeated the Gods in battle, looted all the Gods' possessions and performed all the functions formerly reserved to the Gods (Devimahatmya V: 2–3). Moreover, the two are repeatedly called *paramēśvara*, the highest lords (Devimahatmya V: 57). Bankim could loosely reinterpret the story of these demons as the British paramountcy and consequent loss of Indian independence.

What does the hermit say about the image of the present? 'She has been robbed of everything, that is why she is nude. Today the whole country is a graveyard, that is why our Mother has a garland of bones, dead skulls' (Kaviraj 1995: 138). We might say that in the logic of the identification with the Devimahatmya myth, we are in the middle of the battle against Shumbha and Nishumbha, somewhere in the part where Chanda and Munda are either going to be slain or already have been slain. Bankim may have his readers think about the revolt of Phadke. The demon Raktabija is an appropriate symbol for Western colonial modernity anyway, for like Raktabija it is almost unstoppable. As from the drops of Raktabija's blood new Raktabijas spring up, colonial modernity as colonial dominance can only generate more dominance. The colonial system is able to perpetuate itself and multiply by inducing the Indian upper classes to cooperate with the British administration. If the demon of colonialism is not slain once and for all, it will surely overrun the country completely. Only Kali can vanquish Raktabija. She opens her mouth and drinks his blood and thus prevents new Raktabijas from emerging.

The mother as she will be is the object of the last scene. Then we see the ten-armed image of Durga once more, riding a lion. This seems to refer to the image of the final victory over the two demons. The Devimahatmya *geste* is only finished after the *santāns* of the Goddess have actually fought on her behalf. The *Anandamath* scene ends with the question asked by Mahendra: 'When shall we see our Mother in this form?' The hermit is made to answer: 'The day all her children would call her their mother, she will be pleased with us' (Kaviraj 139). This looks like a straight exhortation to realise the strength of the mother.

The Kamalakanta piece, *Vande Mataram* and the description of the Goddesses together form Bankim's vision of the modern Hindu nation in the making. Bankim did not elaborate the Goddess mythology and theology for his reformed and modern Hinduism, beyond the passages discussed earlier. For Bankim the theology of modern Hinduism was primarily embedded in the Bhagavad Gita.

### Liberation theology of the Hindu nation: Dharmatattva

Between 1884 and 1885 Bankim wrote a philosophical dialogue in Bengali which he serialised in the magazine *Navajivan*, edited by Akshay Chandra Sarkar. Bankim gave this work the title *Dharmatattva*, ‘the Essence of Religion’. In it Bankim elaborates his theory of religion as culture, which he wants to present as a reinterpretation of the doctrine of the Bhagavad Gita.<sup>26</sup> This text, in Bankim’s view, contains the essence of true Hinduism. In this respect Bankim deviates from the earlier canon laid down by Ram-mohun and Debendranath who singled out the Upanishads as the supreme sources of Hinduism. The Bhagavad Gita does extoll devotion (*bhakti*) to the supreme deity Krishna, but this is not its only message. The Gita situates the deliverance of its manifold teachings on the battlefield of Kurukshetra. Its recipient Arjuna is no peaceful renouncer or pupil in a forest but a prince and a military hero. Arjuna does not only hear about the supreme Self and other high theological discourses but Krishna also exhorts him to engage in battle. This military setting of the Gita provides a suitable backdrop to the teachings of militant self-culture to which the *Anandamath* narrative alludes. Once more, by selecting the Bhagavad Gita, Bankim suggests the legitimacy of violent revolution to reach the goal of Hindu modernity. *Dharmatattva* is Bankim’s first complete statement of his Bhagavad Gita theology. Bankim introduces the subject in chapter 1 of the *Dharmatattva*:

GURU: The matter (*tattva*) of religion is the most weighty matter of all, it cannot be elaborated in a few words. But if you think about it, what would it be called?

PUPIL: The foreign [concept of] ‘*Doctrine of Culture*’!

TEACHER: ‘*Culture*’ is not a foreign thing. It is the essence of the Hindu religion.<sup>27</sup>

Further, he argues that:

If I can ever explain this matter, then you will see that the most sacred (*pavitra*) and ambrosial religion that is taught in the Shrimad Bhagavad Gita is built on the essence of this cultivation (*anuśīlan*).

(Bankim Racanāvalī, II: 585)

Chapter 4 explains cultivation in relation to religion.

What tilling (*karṣaṇ*) is for plants, is the cultivation (*anuśīlan*) of his own faculties (*vr̥tti*) for man, therefore in English both are called ‘*CULTURE*’! Therefore it has been said that ‘*The Substance of Religion is Culture*’. Religion (*dharma*) solely consists in pulling upward (*utkarṣaṇ*) man’s faculties.

(op. cit. 591)



Cultivation or *anushilan* is the substance of every religion and thus of Hindu religion. For Bankim religion consists in worship and the best form of worship is worshipping God with attributes (*saguṇa*).

The root of religion (*dharma*) is the worship (*upāsana*) of the Lord (*īśvar*) with attributes as described in our Puranas and [sacred] histories or as described in the Christian scripture, because only He can be our ideal. The worship of Him Whom we call *Impersonal God* is fruitless; the worship of Him Whom we call the *Personal God* is fruitful. . . . One has to desire to be spotless like He is spotless, and to have the capability (*śakti*) towards universal grace in accordance with His capability.  
(op. cit. 593)

In almost Keshubite fashion Bankim is mentioning here together the devotional religion of the Puranas<sup>28</sup> and of Christianity, i.e. of the New Testament. It essentially consists in the emulation on a human scale of the universal benignity of God. Like Debendranath and the general trend of Brahmoism, Bankim rejects explicit Advaita tenets like the identity of the human soul with the divine spirit. Like the Brahmos, Bankim advocates a religion of devotion to God, in other words a *bhakti* cult. *Bhakti* is a major doctrine in the Bhagavad Gita. Bankim promotes a religion based on a reinterpretation of the *bhakti* of the Gita in terms of self-culture and even patriotism. But cults of devotion require figures and stories. These are found in the narrative parts of scriptures of world-religions. Religious figures like Jesus, Buddha and Krishna are role models. Bankim makes the teacher say:

religious history is necessary. The essential parts of the New Testament and our Puranas and [sacred] histories (*itihās*) – without the interpolations – [embody] the genuine ideals of religious history.  
(op. cit. 593)

It is interesting that Bankim – like Keshub and Rammohun – shows partiality for the New Testament when it comes to religious traditions outside Hinduism. Yet the most ideal religious figure according to Bankim is not Jesus, but Krishna. Not the Krishna of the festivals and the pastoral youth stories, but the Krishna of the Mahabharata and the Gita. Bankim puts the following laudation in the mouth of the teacher:

I make obeissance to him who with the force of his arms had subdued the wicked, who with the force of his intelligence had unified India, who with the force of his knowledge had propagated the unprecedented religion of desirelessness . . . who in the times of the predominance of the Vedas had said that ‘not in the Vedas is religion, religion is in the welfare of the people’ – He may be God (*īśvar*) or he may not be God . . . who is

Buddha, Jesus Christ, Mohammad and Rama in one . . . to him I make my obeisance.

(op. cit. 594)

For Bankim, Krishna is a more complete figure than the other religious world teachers he mentions. In a way, Bankim makes Krishna into the ideal prototype of the cultivation-theory he began his dialogue with. Krishna exemplifies to the fullest extent the possibility of human perfectability. Krishna is the ideal type of the person who practises *anushilan*, for Krishna had developed all human faculties. Bankim depicts him as a man of physical strength, of diplomacy, of knowledge and of ethico-religious genius. Krishna is also the ideal warrior because 'with the force of his arms [he] had subdued the wicked'. In other words, Bankim endorses liberative political violence by stressing Krishna's humanity and Krishna's warrior-like nature. Among the other religious figures Bankim mentions, both Buddha and Jesus are not warrior-like. But Mohammad and Rama are. Krishna is the summit of them all.

In chapter 5 Bankim continues his exposition of the proper unfolding and cultivation of all human faculties. He makes the teacher define the faculties as follows:

(1) Human happiness lies in being human; (2) This being-human depends on the proper blossoming of all the faculties (*urtti*), their ripening and harmony/symmetry (*sāmañjasya*).

(op. cit. 594)

Here we have in a nutshell, Bankim's definition of modernity: the full development of all human faculties. It is also the basic requirement of modern nation-building.<sup>29</sup> For Bankim the unfolding of all human faculties is the gist of the Hindu religion.

Bankim is not a Hindu conservative. He does not advocate an uncritical return to the teachings of the ancient Vedic seers. Nor does he advocate the preservation of contemporary Hindu customs and habits.

[T]he essential part of Hindu religion is immortal; it will always remain valid, it will help realize human well-being (*hita*), because its foundation is human nature. But in every religion all specific rules are in accordance with the times. In any particular period they are to be avoided or changed. This is the substance of the recent reforms in Hindu religion.

(op. cit. 595–6)

Bankim clearly saw himself in the same line as other Hindu reformers. These 'recent reforms' seem to refer to the Brahmo Samaj as the originator

of modern Hinduism. Bankim pleaded for a reformation of Hinduism in his 'Letters on Hinduism' (in English), written in about the same time as *Dharmatattva*.

[S]uperstitions and absurdities which subvert its [i.e. Hinduism's] higher purposes . . . it is the duty of every true Hindu, actively to assail and destroy. The noxious parasitic growth must be exterminated before Hinduism can hope further to carry on the education of the human race. Hinduism is in need of reformation . . . reformed and purified, it may yet stand forth before the world as the noblest system of individual and social culture available to the Hindu even in this age of progress. I have certainly no serious hope of progress in India except in Hinduism – in Hinduism reformed, regenerated and purified. To such reformation, it is by no means necessary that we should revert, like the late Dayananda Saraswati to old and archaic types. That which was suited to people who lived three thousand years ago, may not be suited to the present and future generations.

(Bankim Rachanavali, English Works, 1969: 235–6)

Bankim is referring to the founder of the Arya Samaj, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1824–83). Calling him the 'late' Swami one can assume this English passage was written after 1883. Bankim sees little in this Swami as a useful reformer. Dayananda advocated a return to an invented 'original' Hinduism of the Vedas. In order to accomplish this the Swami 'translated' the Vedas in Hindi in such a way that these ancient hymns could be construed to teach a nineteenth-century type of Brahmo monotheism. Dayananda's greatest influence was felt in the Punjab and Gujarat.<sup>30</sup> By contrast, Bankim's Hinduism is not the Hinduism of the past, nor the Hinduism of his contemporaries. He wishes to 'exterminate' its 'noxious parasitic growth'. Like the Hindu Protestant Bankim really is, he rejects otherworldliness and factual fleeing from society. Bankim advocates a 'system of individual and social culture', in other words, his idea of *anushilan* as he unfolds it in *Dharmatattva*. Bankim is the first Hindu social theorist to explicitly distinguish individual and social culture. He advocates individual self-realisation and the collective self-realisation of the nation, both through the application of *anushilan*. The doctrine of *anushilan* bears remarkable resemblances to Christian Protestantism.<sup>31</sup> Bankim's Hinduism – like that of Keshub – is a gospel of self-discipline and self-improvement coupled with social activism.<sup>32</sup>

## Hindu patriotism and nationalism

The story that best exemplifies *anushilan* is the story of *Anandamath*. It serves to illustrate the perfection of social, militant and modern activist Hinduism. *Anandamath* also illustrates the concept of love of the country and its

inhabitants. *Anandamath*'s prime function was to arouse (modern Hindu) patriotism. Bankim interprets patriotism as a specific form of a wider concept of love and devotion. In chapter 21 of *Dharmatattva* Bankim discusses love and patriotism. He notes the strong feeling of patriotism among the Europeans.

PUPIL: Can you explain a little, why it is that in Europe the affection (*vātsalya*) for the country is so strong and in our country it is not?

TEACHER: Yes I can very well. Religion in Europe, especially religion in ancient Europe, was not as advanced as Hindu religion; this is the reason. . . .

Affection for the country is not the highest limit of developing the faculty of love. . . . Love for the whole world (*jagat*) is the highest limit of the faculty of love. That is true religion. . . .

Nowadays it is noticeable that the love of the Europeans is very much limited to their own country, it usually cannot encompass all humans. It is their characteristic (*svabhāva*) that they love their own nation (*jāti*), but cannot stand someone from another nation (*anya-jātīya*). . . . In the eyes of the Muslims all Muslims are almost equal; but between the English Christian and the Russian Christian there is a lot of suspicion. . . .

If the whole world were Muslim, the [Muslim] could love the whole world, but if the whole world were Christian, the German could not love anybody except German, French anybody except French.

(Bankim Racanāvalī II: 648)

Why can Europeans only love their own people and not the whole world? European religion is not only universalistic Christianity, it is in fact an amalgam of Christianity teaching love of the whole world, Judaism which inculcates to love only Israelite country, and Greek and Roman religion which only worshipped beauty and strength. Education in Europe is based on the ideas of Greece and Rome (cf. op. cit. 649). Bankim exclaims 'with their mouth the Europeans profess affection for the world, in their hearts and actions they only have affection for the country' (op. cit. 649). Bankim had observed the nationalist colour of European affection for the world in the nineteenth century. Europe was already organised mainly in nation-states. What he says about Muslims is equally interesting as it reflects an oft-repeated idea of Islamic egalitarianism. Bankim's reasoning that if the whole world were Islamic the Muslims could love the whole world, reflects an idea of Islamic empire. Bankim contrasts it positively with European nationalism.

Bankim is fascinated by the idea of universality, both of love and of God. In the following passage, Bankim carefully builds an argument with two intentions: (1) to provide a religious foundation to a (quasi) universal notion of Indianness and (2) a veiled condemnation of European particularity and

colonial domination in the name of patriotism. In order to do this Bankim points to the difference between the European Christian conception of God and the Hindu conception of God. The Christian God is a reflection of earthly kingship:

The God (*īśvar*) of the Christians is independent of the world. He certainly is the Lord (*īśvar*) of the world, but like the German or the Russian king is a person separate from all the Germans or all the Russians, thus is the Christian God. Standing apart like the earthly king, He protects His kingdom, He punishes his kingdom, He subdues the wicked and protects the good (*śiṣṭa*), and like the police He keeps Himself informed about what people do. If He is to be loved, it has to be done in the specific way . . . of love for an earthly king.

(op. cit. 649)

Love of God in Christianity would be the same as the love for the German emperor or the Russian Czar. The Christian God is a supersized emperor who punishes and rewards and who keeps track of the doings of his subjects.<sup>33</sup> The regal quality of God is of course to be found in the Bible itself, almost throughout. In spite of the slight ironic tone of this passage, Bankim has made a remarkable observation: the Christian (actually the Old-Testamental) God is a divine lawgiver and heavenly king. This is a concept of God which is not found in any form of Hinduism including theistic Hinduism. In Hinduism laws are not given by God, they are immanent immemorial tradition and, moreover, they are not binding. The concept of a literal divine legal text (like the divine laws recorded in the Torah) is alien to Hinduism. But Bankim does not elaborate on these points. He simply contrasts the Christian royal policeman God with the God of Hinduism:

The Hindu God (*īśvar*) is not such. He consists in all beings. He is the inner self of all beings. He is not the material world, He is separate from the world, but the world rests in Him alone.

(op. cit. 649)

The contrast is clear: the Christian God rules His earthly subjects in Christian nations like the emperor of the German empire, the Russian empire, and of course the British Indian empire. The Hindu God does not rule His national subjects. The Hindu God permeates the whole world, the whole universe, for the Hindu God is as always immanent, not transcendent in the sense of the Abrahamic religions.<sup>34</sup> One could also read this passage as a veiled indication of what Indian national feeling in a Hindu religious sense should be: namely to feel that the Hindu God permeates all human (and non-human) living beings in the vast multilingual and multi-ethnic realm that is India. This Bankim does not explicitly say. He makes the pupil notice

a contradiction between universal love (because God dwells in all living creatures) and love of a particular country:

PUPIL: As a result of the ultimate (*pāramārthik*) method of cultivating (*anuśīlan*) love which you have explained, the affection for the country is destroyed (*bhāsiyā yāy*) by affection for [all] people. But because affection for the country was absent, India, after losing independence, has experienced seven hundred years of depravity. How can national uplift (*unnati*) be harmonized with this ultimate love (*pāramārthik prīti*)?

TEACHER: Through the discipline of working without desires (*niṣkāṃ karmayog*) it is possible. . . . The works that are approved of (*anumodita*) by God, should be done. Self-protection, protection of the country, protection of the oppressed, are the means (*sāadhan*) to uplift what is not uplifted; these are all actions that are approved of by God, therefore they have to be done. Thus, having shed [personal] desires, one ought to protect oneself, protect the country, protect one's oppressed fellow countrymen, and do this as a means to uplift the people of the country. (op. cit. 651)

Bankim regarded protection of one's country as an important duty. In fact he seems to identify country with society. Hence society has to be protected as it includes oneself and one's family. And one protects society and the country because it is an action directed towards God. The story of *Anandamath* reads like an illustrative story of the doctrine of self-protection and national protection which Bankim unfolds here. Bankim gives here the arguments for self-protection and protection of national interest: God wants it and since it is possible and within the capability of human beings, it should be done. The link with the teachings of the Bhagavad Gita (which remains all the while as the backdrop of the *anushilan* theory) lies in the terms 'desireless' (*nishkama*) and 'spiritual discipline of working' (*karmayoga*). The latter term occurs four times in the Gita (3.3; 3.7; 5.2; 13.24) and is used to describe a state of mind in which one performs one's social and ritual duties without inner attachment to the fruits thereof. This is the state of inner renunciation, of being an inner world-renouncer, while living within Hindu society (see chapter 3). This state of mind bears some comparison with Weber's 'worldly asceticism' (Weber 2001: 100–1). The classical depiction of this state of mind in the Gita is found in chapter 3, verse 7:

Arjuna, that person is excellent that undertakes the spiritual discipline of actions (*karmayoga*) with the help of the organs of action, while restraining mentally his sense-organs, and thus remaining unattached [to the fruits of social and ritual action].

This verse describes the state of mind of the inner renouncer: performing duties while restraining the outgoing sense-organs with the help of the mind.

The mind must continuously check the desires for worldly life and its fruits. This is the 'worldly asceticism' that the Gita calls *karmayoga*. This concept Bankim has reinterpreted in terms of selflessness and a mentality of service to society.

In chapter 24 of the *Dharmatattva* entitled 'Love of One's Own Country', Bankim maintains that national protection is compatible with the welfare of the whole world.

Like self-protection and protection of one's nearest, protection of one's own country is a work directed towards God; because this procures the welfare (*hita*) of the whole world. If, after mutual attack everything is destroyed and sunk down, and if then some extremely sinful nation – coveting others' goods – were to gain overlordship, then religion and progress (*unnati*) would be destroyed from the face of the earth. Thus, for the sake of the welfare of all beings, it is the duty of everyone to protect one's country.

(op. cit. 660)

There seems little doubt that this 'extremely sinful nation' refers to Great Britain, but of course, Bankim does not say this. He puts the accusation in a hypothetical form: if a very sinful nation were to gain overlordship, religion and progress would be destroyed. That Bankim makes a veiled reference to British colonialism here is also supported by the statement that this extremely sinful nation gains power after the country is destroyed through mutual squabbles. This may refer to the lack of national unity that existed (according to British historiographers in the early nineteenth century) before the Muslim incursions in the thirteenth century, the fifteenth century and of course the British paramountcy acquired in the eighteenth century. In all these cases the local kingdoms and principalities were at war with each other. The Muslims and later the British simply made good use of these divisions.

Next, Bankim goes on to argue against European style patriotism, rather a euphemism for colonial expansion. He makes the teacher describe and define European 'patriotism' in the following way:

What I explained to you as love of country is not European *Patriotism*. European *Patriotism* is a most heinous obnoxious sin. The meaning of the religion of European *Patriotism* is this: that we should snatch away the society of another and bring it into our home society. We will increase the wealth (*śrī*) of our own country, but this has to be done by fully destroying all other nations (*jāti*). Under the influence of this ferocious *Patriotism* all the original nations of America have been wiped out from the face of the earth. May in India the Lord of the world not write such affection for the country on the foreheads of Indians!

(op. cit. 661)

The reference to America – although historically not untrue – seems a mere ploy to avoid direct reference to Britain and the Empire itself. Bankim is expressing a growing perception that the British Empire is sucking India dry.

*Dharmatattva* and *Anandamath* taken together show the first synthesis of Hindu modernist theology addressed to the individual and the collectivity of the Hindu nation. Bankim was blending two trends: Brahmo individualism – reinterpreted as the individual cultivation of all human faculties – with collective emancipation through patriotism. Even though Muslims were not explicitly excluded from this synthesis, its cultural and religious atmosphere is undeniably Hindu.<sup>35</sup>

The basic predicament of Hindu nationalism is captured by Bankim some years after *Dharmatattva*. In 1887 Bankim writes on Indian independence and dependence:

Formerly India had been independent – now for many centuries she has been dependent. The presentday Indians recollect this with deepest anguish. . . . For so long many have stood against us with sword in hand. What doubt is there that happiness lies in independence. Whoever would doubt this is absolutely wicked, the lowest of mankind, etc.

(Bankim Racanāvalī II: 241)

Thus independence must be won through struggle. The many centuries of dependence naturally include the Islamic empires in India from before the British came. Bankim continues his argument by explaining ‘Liberty’ and ‘Independence’ and refers to former Muslim rule:

The Bengalis who have studied English have . . . learned two words ‘Liberty’, ‘Independence’, as their translation we have got *svādhīnatā* and *svatantratā*. Many entertain the idea that these two words signify the same thing. It is the common conviction that they signify a situation in which a people rules itself (*svajātir śāsanādhīm*). If a king is from a different country, then his subjects are dependent, and the realm is under foreign rule. For this reason, India that is presently under British rule is called dependent and under foreign rule. For this reason, India that was ruled by the Mughals or Bengal that was ruled by Shiraj-ud-Daulah is called dependent and under foreign rule.

(Bankim Racanāvalī II: 241)

Why was India not independent all these centuries? Bankim gave an answer that to this day remains a stock phrase: lack of unity among the ancient Hindus. This historically indisputable fact (among others because the category ‘Hindu’ is of recent origin) Bankim uses as an exhortation to



modernise. In an article immediately preceding the one quoted earlier, he states:

I am Hindu, you are Hindu, Ram is a Hindu, Yadu is a Hindu, and there are hundreds of thousands of other Hindus. My well-being (*maṅgal*) lies solely in the well-being of all those hundreds of thousands of Hindus. . . . If all Hindus would adhere to the same duty, than the duties of all Hindus would derive from the selfsame counsel, would depend on a single opinion, and would unitedly cooperate, this notion is the first part of forming a nation; but it is only part of the work. . . .

Let the formation of one's own nation be good or bad, when it has gained strength among the people, then this nation will gain greater strength than other nations. Nowadays this is the leading thought in Europe, and through its impact many violent political revolutions (*rājyaviplav*) are taking place there. Through its impact Italy has become politically unified. Through its impact alone the terribly powerful new German empire has been founded.

(Bankim Racanāvalī II: 239)

Hindu nationalists had since regarded Italy's unification an example worthy of emulation. Similarly Germany's unification under Bismarck was seen as a model, although not as often as Italy's example.

To conclude: Bankim weaved the theme of liberative political violence into his modern Hinduism. Precisely here lies the point of ambiguity in any modernity: the ethical choices one can make between violence and abstaining from violence. Bankim may not have been fully aware of this vexing ambiguity as he does not agonise over the choice for violence as a means to an end. The collectivist militant mode of Hindu modernity gained prominence in the years after Bankim's death. That this militant mode could ultimately spawn violent exclusivism directed against non-Hindu minorities, was not foreseen by its founding father.

The next step was propagating a militant Hindu national message and getting Hindus motivated to actively participate in the project of modernity. In this process there occurred deep splits among the most influential public propagators of Hindu modernising theology and ideology. The split over ethics, over the question of violence and over the question of what exactly was typically Indian about Hindu modernity forced some major protagonists to chose between mild individualistic Hindu reformation or brazen collectivist Hindu nationalism. The split led to two quite distinct variants of Hindu modernity: mellow and individualist, or proud and collectivist. The latter variant pursued the mapping of Bankim's Hinduism down to the very last consequence. Propagating proud Hinduism and unleashing Hindu revolution were the tasks left for, respectively, Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghose.

## Notes

- 1 The story of Exodus refers, of course, to the second book of the Pentateuch, the first part of the Old Testament.
- 2 Cf. Schama (1987: 109–25); Huisman (1983: 51–60). The image of Prince William of Orange as a new Moses leading the Dutch as the new Israelites out of slavery is the theme of a poem written in 1612 by the Dutch poet Joost van den Vondel. The poem is entitled ‘Vergelijkinghe vande verlossinghe der kinderen Israels met de vrijwordinghe der Vereenichde Nederlandsche Provincien’, (‘Comparison between the Liberation of the Children of Israel and the Freeing of the United Dutch Provinces’).
- 3 The Devimahatmya for all practical purposes is an independent text. It is inserted in the Markandeya Purana. For philological details about the Devimahatmya, see Coburn (1988: 51–69, 1992: 8–9).
- 4 I am referring here to the most common counting of the descents, *avatars*, of God Vishnu. There are other counts in which Vishnu descends at least 22 times. On these matters cf. Matchett (2001: 89–90, 150–60).
- 5 This was *Rajmohan’s Wife*, serialised in 1864.
- 6 On the meaning of the title *Anandamath*, cf. Lipner (2005: 44–6).
- 7 An interesting old example of nation-building aesthetics and (religious) ethics is the Dutch book ‘Nederlandsche Gedenck-clanck’ (Dutch Memorial Sounds) by Andriaen Valerius (± 1575–1625). This book, published in 1626, narrates the main military and political events in the war of liberation of the Dutch against the Spanish monarchy and the Inquisition. The narrative is interspersed with 76 songs reflecting on the various exploits mentioned in the text. The songs are given with the melody added in staff notation and in some cases accompaniment for lute. Among the songs is a version of the famous ‘Wilhelmus’ which was adopted as late as 1932 as the Dutch national anthem. Valerius is not the author of the text, nor the composer of the tune. The text was written sometime between 1568 and 1572, probably by Filips van Marnix van St-Aldegonde (1540–98). The ‘Gedenck-clanck’ weds Calvinist and patriotic ethics with the esthetics of song and music. With his book Valerius wanted to strengthen the Dutch sense of nationhood under God. And yet, remarkably, Valerius’s book nowhere refers to the Exodus story as a model.
- 8 In the last decade of the nineteenth century, Filipino anti-colonial nationalism was awakened by two novels: *Noli Me Tangere* (1887) and *El Filibusterismo* (1891). Both were written by the Filipino nationalist and polymath, Dr. José Rizal (executed by the Spanish in Manilla in 1896); cf. on these novels Anderson (1998: 235ff).
- 9 The term ‘Eternal Hindu Code’ is Lipner’s translation of the Bengali/Sanskrit phrase: *Hindu sanātana dharma*, ‘Eternal Hindu religion’.
- 10 For more details about the Gosains and their economic and military influence see Bayly (1983: 143–4, 183–6, 188–9); Cohn (1964); Kolff (1971) and the article by Orr from 1940 reprinted in Gommans and Kolff (2001: 185–201), and most importantly Pinch (2006).
- 11 Dakshinacharan gave his translation the title ‘Apūrba Bhārat Uddhār’ (‘An Unprecedented Deliverance of India’). The complete Bengali text is reprinted in Bandyopadhyay (1993: 64–76).
- 12 Lipner thinks Bankim could have written *Anandamath* anyway and Phadke’s story was not out before Bankim had already long started on *Anandamath* (cf. Lipner 2005: 32).
- 13 *Jananī janmabhūmiś ca svargād api garīyasī*. This line is Sanskrit.
- 14 As this song has become such an icon by itself during the Indian Freedom struggle, it will be well to quote it in full. I refrain from giving the Sanskrit and Bengali

text. On the previous page I have quoted the first lines, since the very first line *Vande Mātaram* or as pronounced in Bengali *bande mātaram*, by itself became a slogan and the title of many seditious nationalist journals. The first word is Sanskrit and means ‘I praise’. *Mātaram* is Sanskrit and means ‘mother’; it is in the accusative case. Lipner translates the song in rhyming English verse (2005: 84–5) and discusses the political impact of the song, especially in connection with the rise of the Sangh Parivar in post-Independence India (2005: 66ff).

- 15 Up till now the song is in pure Sanskrit. Here Bankim is shifting between Bengali and Sanskrit. The use of Sanskrit may indicate that Bankim saw his modern Indian nation in the making primarily as a Sanskritised Hindu nation. On the use of Sanskrit in this nationalist context, cf. Van Bijlert (1996).
- 16 The fierce form of the Goddess. Durga with her ten arms riding her valiant lion vanquishes the buffalo-shaped demon Mahishasura. Durga’s great nine-day festival is celebrated in autumn. It is the main festival of Hindu Bengal.
- 17 Name of Lakshmi, Goddess of wealth. Her festival is celebrated in North India in late autumn as the festival of light, Diwali.
- 18 Literally ‘speech’, a name of Sarasvati, the Goddess of learning and wisdom. Her festival is celebrated in late winter.
- 19 The poem is actually a song. The most well-known melody for it was composed by Rabindranath Tagore. On the tunes of the song see also Lipner (2005: 104–5).
- 20 The *Report on the Census of British India taken on the 17th February 1881* states as the total population of Bengal 69,536,861 persons (p. 5). This is, of course, a fanciful precision. But at least we have the rough estimate of seventy million. On p. 25 of the same report the percentages of Hindus and Muslims in Bengal are given as 65,37 % and 31,22 % respectively. From these facts it is clear that Bankim did not intend his Goddess to represent Hindu Bengal only. This *Report* was printed in London for Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1883. Lipner also notes the number of seventy million (2005: 98).
- 21 Also for Jagaddhatri there is a festival in winter.
- 22 Indicating the ten cardinal points of the compass: zenith, nadir, East, South, West, North and the four directions in between.
- 23 That the Mother is made of earth and consists in earth is literally true. The images of Goddess Durga that are modelled for the Durga Puja, are made of clay on a rough model of bamboo sticks and straw. Thus the Durga image literally does represent the earth of Bengal. After the Puja the image is immersed into the Ganges.
- 24 This is in accordance with the findings of the first Census of British India taken in 1871–2. In the *Memorandum on the Census of British India of 1871–72*, published in London by Her Majesty’s Stationery Office, 1875, p. 13, the total number of inhabitants of Bengal is around sixty million. Of these 64,5 % is Hindu, 32,3 % is Muslim. So also in the Kamalakanta text Bankim included all Bengalis irrespective of their religious background in the arms of the Goddess. See the earlier note on the seventy million Bengalis referred to in *Vande Mataram*.
- 25 I am throughout referring to the Sanskrit edition of Sharma (1997), also for the verse-numbering. This has to be kept in mind, as many editions of the Devimahatmya count words as verses in order to arrive at the mystical number of 700 verses or mantras for the text. In reality the text has got around 500 verses.
- 26 Bankim also wrote a running commentary on the Bhagavad Gita, up to chapter 4, verse 19. Harder (2001) contains an excellent translation and explanation of this text by Bankim. For the present purpose of showing the ideology of *anushilan* as it ‘worked’ later in the actual militant struggles, the focus must remain on the *Dharmatattva*. This book was often studied. Bankim’s Gita commentary has

always been somewhat neglected. Bankim published his Gita commentary serially between 1886–8 in the Bengali journal *Prachar*. In 1902 the text appeared in book form.

- 27 The words in my translation which are in italics indicate the actual English words that Bankim uses in his Bengali text.
- 28 Bankim primarily thinks of the Bhagavata Purana and the Vishnu Purana and the Harivamsha which are the main sources for the stories about Krishna's life and deeds.
- 29 Cf. Taylor's remark about Western contemporary modernity: 'everyone in our civilization feels the force of this appeal to accord people the freedom to develop in their own way' (1989: 12).
- 30 For a brief sketch of Dayananda's activities and the movement he started in Bombay, see Jones (1989: 95–103). A good and full biography is Jordens (1997).
- 31 I maintain this in spite of Bankim's own assertions that he was an avid follower of Auguste Comte and the latter's philosophy of Positivism. On Bankim and Positivism, see Flora (1993: 14–30).
- 32 See in connection with the Protestant mentality, Chapter 2 of this book; Weber (2001: 64), 'God requires social achievements'. Taylor thinks the tremendous this-worldly activism of the Calvinists is based on a drive 'to combat a disorder which continuously stinks in God's nostrils' (1989: 228).
- 33 The idea to almost identify the concept of God with that of an emperor or a Czar is reminiscent of the famous essay 'God and the State' in which the Russian Anarchist Michael Bakunin (1814–76) defends atheism and pleads for a revolution against earthly powerholders such as the German emperor and the Russian Czar. Bakunin argues that since the State oppresses people it should be abolished and the State derives its power from the strongly ingrained idea of God who is the heavenly prototype of the earthly absolute ruler (cf. Bakunin 1970). Thus revolutionaries should first do away with God and then with the State. Bankim also portrays the Christian God as a ruler of a (heavenly) state. Bankim stresses the transcendent nature of the Abrahamic Deity. Therefore he pictures God as a heavenly Czar.
- 34 Immanent universal divinity – which is the typically Hindu concept of God – stands in absolute opposition to the Abrahamic transcendent divinity, cf. Assmann (2010: 33–5).
- 35 I am aware that Bankim has stirred a lot of controversy already in his lifetime. Two major points are always raised against Bankim: (1) he was a Muslim baiter; (2) he was a Hindu communalist. For a comprehensive overview of positive and negative criticism of Bankim, see Harder (2001: 162–8). For a sensible discussion of the alleged anti-Muslim stance of Bankim in *Anandamath*, see Lipner (2005: 61–70, 75–85). A sober analysis of the *anushilan* theory might dispel doubts about Bankim's reformist Hindu agenda. He did not belong to the camp of Hindu conservatives, nor does he seem to be the rabiate Hindu communalist some want to see in him. He does not write much about Muslims and has no deep intellectual interest in Islam. In this respect he is no different from most Brahmos of his time, including Rabindranath Tagore whose fame in the twentieth century far exceeded that of Bankim. Rabindranath Tagore is also nowadays held in high esteem even in predominantly Muslim Bangladesh.

## 6 Propagating and fighting

### Swami Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo

#### Sri Ramakrishna (1836–86)

The idea of individual Hindu modernity had been born from the Vedanta; collective Hindu modernity was fed by Protestant Brahmoism and had acquired intellectual and emotional poignancy in Bankim. Yet it remained largely an attractive idea although with wide currency. Ideas by themselves are necessary for motivating minds, but without the means to reach a potentially receptive audience, ideas linger in sterile inactivity. That Bankim had created an imagery and an ideology of national Hindu modernity of great potential became clear only a decade or more after his death. Now it took propagandist activity and organisational skills to prepare the ground. Collective Hindu modernity remained largely within the ideological boundaries set by Brahmos and Brahmoism. In Chapter 4 we referred to Keshub and his relationship with Sri Ramakrishna. Now we will direct our attention to Sri Ramakrishna himself whose thought and Hindu religious charisma were mediated by his disciple Vivekananda and later on by Sri Aurobindo (Arabindo).

Sri Ramakrishna was born in 1836 as Gadadhar Chattopadhyay in a Brahmin family of small means. His place of birth, the village of Kamarpukur (district Hooghly) had offered him limited education. He knew Bengali but no English. In 1852 he went to Calcutta joining his eldest brother Ramkumar who had opened a school there. In 1855 Ramkumar was appointed temple priest of the newly built Kali-temple complex at Dakshineshwar in North Calcutta. Gadadhar was trained by Ramkumar to perform the worship of the Goddess Kali, the main deity of Dakshineshwar. Ramkumar died in 1856 and Gadadhar succeeded him as priest. The next ten years Gadadhar became the sage, mystic and saint of Dakshineshwar, Sri Ramakrishna, who stated he had repeatedly experienced God by following many Hindu religious disciplines to their very limits. Into these disciplines he had been initiated by various itinerant Hindu world-renouncers (and one Sufi). In the end he himself became a world-renouncer, initiated as a sannyasi in 1865 by the Vedanta mendicant Tota Puri.<sup>1</sup> In the years that followed Sri Ramakrishna grew from seeker to master, and initiated his own disciples into the

spiritual treasures he had discovered with the help of many visiting spiritual teachers like Tota Puri.

Sri Ramakrishna's realisations were wide-ranging. He was a mystic and a devotee, not a scholar or a theologian. From the main source for his later years, *The Gospel*, it is clear that Sri Ramakrishna's religion was based on personal mystical experiences. These came to him spontaneously. But he always felt the need to have them 'verified' by tradition. Therefore he practised many different Hindu spiritual disciplines under the guidance of various religious instructors that had come to Dakshineshwar. The main ingredients of Sri Ramakrishna's spiritual disciplines were the practice of *tantra*; the practice of devotion, *bhakti*, for the Goddess Kali and the male Gods Krishna and Rama; and the meditational practice of Advaita Vedanta. Actually, *tantra* played a important role in Sri Ramakrishna's *Werdegang*.<sup>2</sup> The many *sadhanas*, 'spiritual disciplines', of Sri Ramakrishna did not figure prominently in the later public image that was created of him by the early Ramakrishna Mission. Swami Vivekananda, Ramakrishna's most prominent disciple, seldom referred in public to these details in the life of Sri Ramakrishna. In the early twentieth century the emphasis was on Sri Ramakrishna the devotee and saint who perfected Vedanta for modern times. It was also stressed that Sri Ramakrishna was a universal saint as he had also practised Christianity and Sufi Islam for a brief period. After these brief spells he claimed to have experienced the same God as he had experienced through various Hindu spiritual disciplines. This point has been made again and again, even though the sources themselves are brief on these matters. For details on the tantric side of Sri Ramakrishna one could turn to Neevel (1976: 75–81). Neevel also discusses the Advaita image created by the Swamis of the Ramakrishna Mission (op. cit.: 81–4). A more important and lengthy study of Sri Ramakrishna's tantric practices is Kripal (1995). Kripal makes the highly controversial claim that Sri Ramakrishna had homoerotic tendencies. Kripal bases his claim as indeed his whole study on a detailed reading of the *Kathamrita*, the major Bengali source for Sri Ramakrishna's teachings and instructions during the last six years of his life. *Bhakti* and continuous mystical experience of *samadhi* (a spiritual condition of high concentration and direct awareness of God) played a major role in his spiritual disciplines. Here lies the difference between Sri Ramakrishna and Keshub's universalistic Brahmoism. Keshub stressed the devotional attitude of *bhakti*, but Sri Ramakrishna seems to have been gifted with an exceptional aptitude for *samadhi*.

Let us briefly turn to one of the main sources of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings, *The Gospel*. As has been indicated in Chapter 4, the *Gospel* is an English reworking of the Bengali *Kathamrita*. The *Kathamrita* is probably the only primary source of the actual teachings and sayings of Sri Ramakrishna. The other source is the *Lilaprasanga*. Swami Nikhilananda's English translation of the Bengali *Kathamrita* is more or less faithful but misses the homeliness of Ramakrishna's Bengali in the original. Kripal, however,

maintains that the *Kathamrita* was conceived as a lengthy play and may not contain verbatim reports of actual conversations (cf. Kripal 1995: 3–6, 329–36). But for the purpose of understanding the cult around Sri Ramakrishna the historicity of his actual words is of less importance. The cult built around Sri Ramakrishna was what made him popular after his death and it determined the way the Indian audiences got acquainted with him.

Some samples of Sri Ramakrishna's teachings show his popular appeal. In the *Gospel* some representative statements about devotion (*bhakti*) to God are recorded. They are allegedly made in February 1883:

there is no doubt about the sanctity of God's name. But can a man achieve anything, without the yearning love of the devotee behind it? . . . Suppose a man repeats the name of God mechanically, while his mind is absorbed in 'women and gold'. Can he achieve anything? Mere muttering of magic words doesn't cure one of the pain of a spider or scorpion sting.

(The Gospel: 190)

Sri Ramakrishna rejects dogmatism and sectarian devotion:

With sincerity and earnestness one can realize God through all religions. The Vaishnavas will realize God, and so will the Saktas, the Vedantists, and the Brahmos. The Mussalmans and Christians will realize Him too. . . . Some people indulge in quarrels, saying, 'One cannot attain anything unless one worships our Krishna', or, 'Nothing can be gained without the worship of Kali, our Divine Mother', or, 'One cannot be saved without accepting the Christian religion.' This is pure dogmatism. . . . This is a bad attitude. God can be reached by different paths.

(The Gospel: 191)

Sri Ramakrishna propagates here the same universalism as Keshub, but the difference is that Sri Ramakrishna could claim to have personally experienced that all these different religious paths would lead to the same God. Sri Ramakrishna acts as the spokesman or is made into the spokesman of Hindu universalism. This tendency was a useful precondition (as we will see later) for the universal claims of Indian nationhood which would need to give a place to all religious cults and cultural traditions within the realm of the nation.

At another occasion, a month later, Sri Ramakrishna is talking to some Brahmos. He is explaining the difference between formal *bhakti* and deep emotional *bhakti*. In the same context Sri Ramakrishna explains the experience of *samadhi*:

One does not follow the injunctions of ceremonial worship when one . . . loves God as one's own. Then it is like crossing a rice-field after the harvest. . . . You can go straight across the field in any direction. . . .

Without this intense attachment, this passionate love, one cannot realize God. . . .

In samadhi I lose outer consciousness completely; but God generally keeps a little trace of ego in me for the enjoyment of divine communion. . . .

[S]ometimes God effaces even that trace of 'I'. Then one experiences jada samadhi or nirvikalpa samadhi.<sup>3</sup> That experience cannot be described. A salt doll went to measure the depth of the ocean, but before it had gone far into the water it melted away. . . . Then who was to come back and tell the ocean's depth?

(The Gospel: 196–7)

Here Sri Ramakrishna blends the experience of intense devotion, *bhakti*, with what he regards as the goal of Advaita Vedanta as well, namely *samādhi*. In this passage love of God and the Advaita Vedanta ideal of unity with God through deep trance are brought together as different aspects of the same spiritual discipline. Sri Ramakrishna here also exemplifies the ideal inner freedom of the world-renouncer. Throughout his life he showed the tendency towards world-renunciation to a high degree. His teachings breathe exclusive devotion to God which can only be fully realised when one renounces all worldliness. He trained his intimate disciples to become world-renouncing God-seekers. When Sri Ramakrishna passed away in 1886, he left behind a group of 16 disciples who had become world-renouncers.<sup>4</sup> He had personally trained these 16 young men. Already in 1886 they had formed a closely knit group and in the same year began to live as monks in a house at Baranagore. In 1892 they shifted to Alambazar until 1898 when they permanently settled at Belur Math near the garden house of an admirer.<sup>5</sup>

### Narendranath Datta, Swami Vivekananda (1863–1902)

Narendranath (short Naren) Datta came from a highly educated upper-middle-class Hindu family. The Dattas – kayasthas by caste – lived in Calcutta. Naren's father was an attorney at the Calcutta High Court. In religious matters Naren was educated by his mother who taught him the Bengali *Rāmāyaṇ* (by the Bengali poet Kṛttibās, fifteenth century) and *Mahābhārat* (by the Bengali poet Kāśīrām Dās, seventeenth century). In early youth Naren seems to have been given to spontaneous meditations, and he had visions of light just before falling asleep. He had a great capacity for learning, sports and music. While studying for his BA at the Scottish Churches' College at Calcutta, he developed an interest in the Brahmo Samaj under the influence of Keshub. Naren used to sing in the Brahmo choir. The earliest English biography of Vivekananda states that

With the rest of the Brahmo Samaj he believed in a formless God with attributes, (as distinguished from the Absolute of the Advaita Vedanta).

(The Life of Swami Vivekananda, Vol. I: 36)



Naren visited several religious teachers among whom was Debendranath, but they all disappointed him for they had not actually seen God. He turned to Sri Ramakrishna who he had heard about from principal Hastie of his college. In Sri Ramakrishna Naren found what he was looking for: a person who claimed to experience God all the time. From 1881 onwards Naren frequently visited Sri Ramakrishna at Dakshineswar. The biography claims that

At their first meeting Sri Ramakrishna instantaneously recognised that Naren was the one who was to carry his message to the world. . . .

Sri Ramakrishna was the heart of old India, with its spiritual perspective, its asceticism and its realisations, – the India of the Upanishads. . . .

The result of the contact . . . was the Swami Vivekananda who was to become the heart of a New India, with the ancient spiritual perspective heightened, widened and strengthened to include modern learning.

(The Life, Vol. I: 53)

One could disagree with the wording of this assessment; the facts are not untrue and are still being defended today by scholarly opinion. Sri Ramakrishna may not have been ‘the heart of old India’. Rather, he was the fruit of the early nineteenth century. He had received a little bit of education at the village school. Primarily he was a product of himself, of his extraordinary mystical and visionary gifts. But to the extent that he acted and lived as a world-renouncer, he was, as it were, a representative of the ancient Indian institution of world-renunciation. Sri Ramakrishna’s spirituality was highly devotional, mystical and individualistic. These traits are also motive forces of Vedantist Hindu modernity. Vivekananda probably saw this immediately. And thus the meeting between the two: Sri Ramakrishna the gifted mystic and Narendranath Datta the mystic seeker and trained modern intellectual produced the Swami Vivekananda who was ‘the heart of a New India’. Also this latter phrase needs qualification. Vivekananda was not the first ‘heart of a New India’, but he was certainly its first world-famous propagandist.

### **Vivekananda and world-renunciation**

Vivekananda’s influence on Hindu modernity and late nineteenth-century Hindu nationalism lies not only in what he said and wrote but more so in what he was, namely a world-renouncer. The Brahmos had wished to copy a Western Protestant model of church organisation and hence almost discarded and discredited the idea of renunciation.<sup>6</sup> Their influence remained confined to the select few belonging to the urbanised upper-middle classes. Orthodox Hindu revivalism was a reaction to the Brahmo movement, but also did not utilise the renunciation idiom. Its social background was much the same as that of the Brahmos. In fact one could regard the two as aspects

of the same urbanised form of Hinduism. That is why Brahmoism and Hindu conservatism could easily be assimilated by the world-renouncing Swami Vivekananda. World-renunciation was, after all, a widely recognised religious institution. Vivekananda was the first nineteenth-century Hindu reformer of note who was a monk, a renouncer, and not simply a business man, a zamindar, or a district magistrate writing about religious doctrines. This fact, more than anything else, accounts for Vivekananda's success. The anti-colonial nationalist upsurge in British India that followed almost immediately upon Vivekananda's public ministry only supports this thesis.

The revolutionaries in Bengal in the early twentieth century were not just political operators or guerrilla fighters, but consciously cultivated their public image as world-renouncers of sorts. The organisational model they were following was based on the sannyasi-army depicted in Bankim's novel *Anandamath*. Books by Vivekananda were the staple reading of these early revolutionaries.<sup>7</sup> Their obvious message to the Indian public was that the highest values for social and political change (nationalist revolution) cannot derive from that social world itself but must come from outside it, i.e. from the sphere of world-renunciation (which is both sacred and dangerous for it upsets the everyday social order). In this respect, Swami Vivekananda became an Indian role model combining in himself individual religious salvation with collective national and social freedom. He legitimised his own version of Vedanta and world-renunciation by showing himself to be the disciple of Sri Ramakrishna. Vivekananda presented the latter figure as the ultimate new universalist world-teacher and at the same time, he more or less kept the more Brahmoist version of Vedanta intact for propaganda purposes. In any case, Vivekananda never revealed much about Sri Ramakrishna's tantric background, but made him into the acme of Advaita Vedanta. Vivekananda needed Sri Ramakrishna as the ideal world-renouncer which he could hold up as an example for the whole world.

The most elaborate tribute that Vivekananda paid to Sri Ramakrishna was in two lectures, combined under the title 'My Master' in 1896. Vivekananda begins by claiming that the Western nations are great because of their material civilisation, whereas the 'Orient', i.e. India, is great because of her spirituality (cf. Complete Works, Vol. 4: 154–5). The theme of Indian spirituality versus Western materialism seems to be a variation on Bankim's idea that the Hindu concept of religion is universalist, whereas the European concept of religion is based on particularity and domination (cf. chapter 5 and the reference to Bankim *Racānavalī* II: 648). The idea of Indian spirituality versus Western materialism gained great popularity in the course of the twentieth century. Vivekananda develops this theme as he describes the poor conditions of Sri Ramakrishna's family and the simplicity of the latter's upbringing (cf. Complete Works, Vol. 4: 160–6). Vivekananda expatiates on Sri Ramakrishna's love for the Goddess Kali at some length (cf. op. cit. vol.

4: 167–73). Then Vivekananda summarises two lessons on religion he had learnt from Sri Ramakrishna:

The first ideal . . . to realise religion is that of renunciation. Darkness and light, enjoyment of the world and enjoyment of God will never go together. ‘Ye cannot serve God and Mammon’.<sup>8</sup> Let people try it if they will, and I have seen millions in every country who have tried. . . . This is a hard and long task, but you must begin it here and now. Bit by bit we must go towards it.

The second idea that I learnt from my Master, and which is perhaps most vital, is the wonderful truth that the religions of the world are not contradictory or antagonistic. They are but various phases of one eternal religion. That one eternal religion is applied to different planes of existence, is applied to the opinions of various minds and various races. There never was my religion or yours, my national religion or your national religion; there never existed many religions, there is only the one. One infinite religion existed all through eternity and will ever exist, and this religion is expressing itself in various countries in various ways.

(op. cit. vol. 4: 180)

That religion means renunciation is indeed the fundamental insight in the origins of Hindu spirituality. Vivekananda was the most prominent Hindu public figure of the late nineteenth century to stress this point. In this respect Vivekananda was ‘traditional’, as his master was ‘traditional’. In any case, Vivekananda here expressed a view, or perhaps a general feeling, that true promoters of religious doctrine and edification should as well actually be world-renouncers and that world-renunciation (in whatever form whether external or internalised) is the true source of religious inspiration and of motivating others. The one ‘infinite religion’ that existed ‘all through eternity’ harks back to Bankim’s idea of true Hinduism as ‘eternal religion’. Vivekananda formulates a view of religion that has become emblematic of Hindu universalism. His observation is only valid within the context of Hinduism whose theology posits an immanent divinity. This is precisely what Vivekananda explains here.

### **Vedanta as universal religion**

The second ‘lesson’ represents Vivekananda’s ‘reading’ of Sri Ramakrishna. This one universal religion in his view is Advaita Vedanta, for the Advaita theology can be made to fit into almost every form of Hindu worship of particular Gods like Krishna or Kali. Vivekananda simply extends this possibility to other world-religions, more particularly Islam and Christianity. After all, both were important political factors in colonial India: Islam because

more than 40 % of the Indians belonged to it, and Christianity because it was overwhelmingly the religion of the British overlords of India. If Vedanta is this 'one infinite religion', it must be the most common national Indian religion, and as such could serve as the basis of an Indian ideology of modernity. This national religion is the result of Sri Ramakrishna's advent. Vivekananda makes this pronouncement in the same lecture:

Today the name of Shri Ramakrishna Paramahansa is known all over India to its millions of people. Nay, the power of that man has spread beyond India. . . .

This is the message of Shri Ramakrishna to the modern world: 'Do not care for doctrines, do not care for dogmas, or sects, or churches, or temples; they count for little compared with the essence of existence in each man, which is spirituality; and the more this is developed in a man, the more powerful is he for good'.

(op. cit. vol. 4: 186–7)

Vivekananda makes Sri Ramakrishna into a mouthpiece of Vedantic modernity: each individual can develop his or her own spirituality within the self and need not care anymore about the outer forms of organised religions. Vivekananda strongly believed that some form of Vedanta would represent this universal religion. In a lecture entitled 'The Ideal of a Universal Religion', he argues that universal religion can be attained by blending four forms of spiritual discipline, *yoga*:

this religion is attained by what we, in India, call Yoga – union. To the worker, it is union between men and the whole of humanity, to the mystic, between his lower and Higher Self; to the lover, union between himself and the God of Love; and to the philosopher, it is the union of *all* existence.

(op. cit. vol. 2: 388)

These four types of union correspond to *karma-yoga*, union through work; *raja-yoga*, union through mysticism; *bhakti-yoga*, union through love; *jnana-yoga*, union through philosophy.<sup>9</sup>

What made Vivekananda think that this message had validity both for India and outside India? In 1893 Vivekananda had received an invitation to represent Hinduism at the Parliament of Religions, a sort of universal religious gathering held at Chicago. At this gathering were present representatives of various Indian religious communities: Brahmos, Jains, Parsees, Theosophists and Indian Muslims.<sup>10</sup> On 11 September 1893 Vivekananda addressed the crowd in Chicago with the famous words: 'Sisters and Brothers of America' (op. cit. vol. 1: 3). These words and the subsequent lectures had a noticeable impact on the audience and the press. He spoke not as a

‘meek’ Hindu but as a self-conscious representative of an ancient civilisation that was in no way inferior to Western civilisation:

It fills my heart with joy unspeakable to rise in response to the warm and cordial welcome which you have given us. I thank you in the name of the most ancient order of monks in the world; I thank you in the name of the mother of religions; and I thank you in the name of the millions and millions of Hindu people of all classes and sects. . . .

I am proud to belong to a religion which has taught the world both tolerance and universal acceptance. We believe not only in universal toleration, but we accept all religions as true. I am proud to belong to a nation which has sheltered the persecuted and the refugees of all religions and all nations of the earth.

(op. cit. vol. 1: 3)

His main points are that he speaks as a monk (in other words as a world-renouncer); that Hinduism is the most ancient surviving religion in the world, it is the ‘mother of religions’; and that Hinduism is tolerant and has given shelter to all who were persecuted for religious reasons elsewhere. One could, with some imagination, read in this passage a programme of what future Hindu India ought to be or become. That Hinduism is all-encompassing in Vivekananda’s view, is also expressed in a lecture held a few days later:

From the high spiritual flights of the Vedanta philosophy, of which the latest discoveries of science seem like echoes, to the low ideas of idolatry with its multifarious mythology, the agnosticism of the Buddhists and the atheism of the Jains, each and all have a place in the Hindu’s religion.

(op. cit. vol. 1: 6)

We hear the echoes in these words not only of high Vedanta philosophy, but also of (Keshubite) Brahmoism. Vedanta always had a good standing with the Brahmos. Rammohun Roy was the first to promote the Vedanta as the Hindu philosophy/theology *par excellence*. That ‘idolatry’ is a ‘low idea’ is certainly a solid Brahmo doctrine and not something Vivekananda could have borrowed from his master, Sri Ramakrishna who himself practised idol-worship very intensively as a spiritual discipline. The Hinduism that gives so much place to all these different tendencies: Buddhist agnosticism, Jain atheism and popular Hindu ‘idolatry’ is a nineteenth-century Keshubite Brahmo concept that can be obtained from the Vedanta. The latter allows a universalistic view on all forms of religious practice, precisely because it is an ideology of either inner or total world-renunciation and does not need to contend with other renouncers’ sects for supremacy in a worldly social context.<sup>11</sup> But this fact about Vedanta does not detract from the fact that

Buddhism and Jainism are also world-renouncing spiritualities organised in sects of monastic renouncers. For their material continuity they needed possessions and therefore contended with each other in theological debates with a view to establish who would be eligible to be 'subsidised' by local power-holders. But in Vivekananda's times such financial considerations had lost importance. As a modernist, Vivekananda was not interested in debating with Jains and Buddhists but in establishing Vedanta as a universalist pan-Indian theology/ideology of modernity.

### **Vivekananda's national Hindu ethics**

Shamita Basu (2002) has devoted a sociological study to Vivekananda's Hinduism as a nationalist religious ideology. In her view Vivekananda 'wanted to advocate a form of Hinduism that was a far cry from the parochial version of the religion which the orthodox Hindu leaders wanted to popularize'. The Swami was propagating a form of Hinduism that would offer a 'common ground of spiritual unity among all the religions and sects'. He found this in Ramakrishna's Hinduism (Basu 2002: 127). Furthermore, in Basu's view in 'India, in which every community would have its own cultural space, it would require a conception of religion whose spiritual openness would provide the cultural framework to accommodate diversities and enable a democratic nation to hold itself together' (op. cit. 129). Vivekananda's reconstruction of Hinduism 'would be capable of claiming legitimacy for itself not as a religion but as a universal moral philosophy' (op. cit.: 129).

Vivekananda – broad-minded, generous to all faiths and peoples, cosmopolitan and yet patriotic – propagated a universalistic moral philosophy on the basis of Vedanta. According to Vivekananda the metaphysical principle of ethics lies in the following argument: if I injure others, I am in a deep metaphysical sense injuring myself, because the one Universal, infinite Soul inheres in all (op. cit.: 182). This realisation 'provided the spiritual ground for ethical action, and it was argued that the universal philosophy of Advaita provided for the salvation of mankind as a whole' (op. cit.: 182).<sup>12</sup> This concept of universal Soul also gave a solid foundation to the idea of nationalism and national identity. Basu argues 'Vivekananda claimed that the social significance of religion must be perceived in its ability to offer a comprehensive philosophy of ethical action' (op. cit.: 182).

In this connection Basu points to another remarkable feature of Vivekananda's philosophy. Like his predecessors starting from Rammohun Roy, Vivekananda is credited with having separated private Hindu morality from public morality (op. cit.: 185). In other words, Vivekananda evidently distinguished between these two spheres. Private morality is contained in the Vedantic ethics of the One Self. This was extended to encompass the public sphere as well, as the Supreme Self is omnipresent. Thus the highest ideals of private morality should also govern the public sphere, i.e. the sphere

outside the home. The distinction between private and public is necessary to ensure a common nationhood and prevent power abuses. The public sphere is supposed to protect the citizen against the whims of power-holders. These socio-political implications of the distinction between private and public must have been clear to Vivekananda. However, he did not base his conception of private and public morality on Western liberalism alone, but on a new understanding of Vedanta. All public reforms such as women's education, widow remarriage and emancipation from the bondage of caste, could be defended on the basis of the spiritual principle of *moksha* or liberation (op. cit.: 188). Advaita Vedanta, Basu maintains, 'preached the most comprehensive nationalist ideology by making nationalism the highest spiritual act' (op. cit.: 188). Vivekananda 'bended' *dharma* into a form of spirituality that 'became synonymous with renunciation and selfless action'. These ideals also inspired the early protagonists of the Indian Freedom movement, notably the revolutionaries (op. cit.: 189).

In her introduction, Basu summarises her problematic as follows: modernity in India began with the Brahmo Samaj, but later on came under severe pressure from conservative Hindus. Consequently modernity might have failed had it not been for Vivekananda who was able to 'appropriate the conservative and popular' and make it assume a 'nationalist form' (op. cit.: 3). Vivekananda blended the different strands of modernism (Brahmo) and conservatism ('orthodox'/conservative Hindus) into a new Hindu nationalist idiom.

### Hindu/Indian patriotism

Nationalism as Indian patriotism was not invented by Vivekananda. There were precursors such as Bankim. Even long before Bankim there was the half-Indian, half-Portuguese Derozio (who was not a Hindu but considered himself to be an Indian). Henry Louis Derozio (1809–31) born in Calcutta, had taught English at the Hindu College where he influenced his upper-caste Hindu pupils into disrespecting hallowed Hindu traditions and adopting a rationalist outlook on life.<sup>13</sup> Derozio acquired fame as a poet in English. One of his sonnets is entitled 'To India – My Native Land':

My country! In thy day of glory past  
A beauteous halo circled round thy brow,  
And worshipped as a deity thou wast.  
Where is that glory, where that reverence now?  
Thy eagle pinion is chained down at last,  
And grovelling in the lowly dust art thou:  
Thy minstrel hath no wreath to weave for thee  
Save the sad story of thy misery!

The ancient country with its glorious past now lies chained in colonial bondage. The country – once a deity – now lies grovelling in the dust. It

is noteworthy that this was written before 1831. The outlines of classical nationalist exhortation is visible. All the poet can do is to salvage some wreckage from the glorious past:

A few small fragments of those wrecks sublime.

The poet hopes his act of salvaging will earn him some recognition:

And let the guerdon<sup>14</sup> of my labour be  
My fallen country! one kind wish from thee!

(Poems of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio: 2)

In 1854, the Bengali and English writing poet Michael Madhusudan Datta (1824–73) who had converted to Christianity but gained most of his inspiration from Hindu Sanskrit literature, published a lecture under the title ‘The Anglo-Saxon and the Hindu’. From the content of the lecture is it evident that Madhusudan does not clearly distinguish between Hindus and Indians. He bemoans the fate of India, once great but now fallen:

The Hindu as he stands before you, is a fallen being; – Once – a green, a beautiful, a tall, a majestical, a flowering tree – but now – blasted by lightning! . . . Volumes could be written on the glories of Old India.

(Madhusūdan Racanāvalī: 630)

But instead of exhorting his fellow Hindus, Madhusudan expects regeneration from the British, from British colonial rule:

It is the mission . . . ye manly sons and ye fair daughters of the Anglo-Saxon, it is the glorious mission of the Anglo-Saxon to regenerate, to renovate the Hindu race! The trumpet-call of the Anglo-Saxon, is destined to rouse from his grave the Hindu, to a brighter, a fairer existence.

(op. cit.: 635)

Madhusudan’s recipe for upliftment is the Christianisation of the Hindus. This would regenerate them:

it is the mission of the Anglo-Saxon to renovate, to regenerate, to Christianize the Hindu – to churn his vast ocean, that it may restore the things of beauty now buried in its liquid wilderness.

(op. cit.: 637)

The language of patriotism is in place: the glorious past is gone, this is a cause for sadness but also a reason to desire regeneration. The difference with later Hindu nationalism is that Madhusudan did not exhort Hindus to



do the regeneration themselves but invited British colonial administration to perform this work.

In a published lecture delivered in 1865 at the Young Men's Literary Association, Calcutta bearing the title 'Bengalis as They Are, and as They Ought to Be', patriotism is attributed only to Rammohun Roy who 'stands perhaps as the only example we can hold up for our admiration . . . for our imitation' (p. 24).<sup>15</sup> Furthermore, 'patriotism of a high order must grow out of a wider culture and be connected with a civilization in which such a culture can be developed. . . [involving] the grandest moral principles and the purest social aims' (p. 28). Towards the end of the lecture it becomes clear that patriotism needs to be nourished by a religion: 'patriotism is a plant which will never thrive but, in the soil watered by the hand of Faith, – a nationality of religious union' (p. 32). The author does not specify that this religion must be Hinduism. Given his educated audience and the location where the lecture was held, it could very well have been Christianity or Brahmoism.

However, turning to Vivekananda and his idea of patriotism, there is no doubt that for him the religion that should water the Indian soil is Vedantist Hinduism. After his return to India in 1897 from his prolonged stay in the North America and Europe, Vivekananda was ever more aware of his international fame as a representative of modern Indian/Hindu religious culture. Back in India he tried to mould Vedantist Hinduism into Indian nationalism and patriotism. What India, the Indian masses, needed was not spirituality but national regeneration. He gave voice to these concerns in many exhortatory speeches. A good sample of Vivekananda's nationalist/patriotic rhetoric is the following part of a lecture he gave at the Victoria Hall in Madras (probably in February 1897):

I believe in patriotism, and I also have my own ideal of patriotism. Three things are necessary for great achievements. First, feel from the heart. What is in the intellect or reason? It goes a few steps and there it stops. But through the heart comes inspiration. Love opens the most impossible gates; love is the gate to all the secrets of the universe. Feel, therefore, my would-be reformers, my would-be patriots! Do you feel? Do you feel that millions and millions of the descendants of gods and of sages have become next-door neighbours to brutes? Do you feel that millions are starving today, and millions have been starving for ages? Do you feel that ignorance has come over the land as a dark cloud? Does it make you restless? Does it make you sleepless? Has it gone into your blood, coursing through your veins, becoming consonant with your heartbeats? Has it made you almost mad? Are you seized with that one idea of the misery of ruin, and have you forgotten all about your name, your fame, your wives, your children, your property, even your own bodies? Have you done that? That is the first step to become a patriot, the very first step. I did not go to America, as most of you

know, for the Parliament of Religions, but this demon of a feeling was in me and within my soul.

(Complete Works, Vol. 3: 225–6)

Vivekananda seems to imply that for patriotism and nationalism to ‘work’, they must contain emotional appeals. They must ‘speak’ to the sense of aesthetics and emotions rather than only to the sense of ethics and rationality. Patriotism and nationalism are feelings (gut-feelings if one is allowed this populist expression), they are a form of love. Hence Bankim brought the concept of *bhakti* into play in order to rouse the feeling of nationalism. Vivekananda does the same here. He continues his exhortation:

You may feel, then; but instead of spending your energies in frothy talk, have you found any way out, any practical solution, some help instead of condemnation, some sweet words to soothe their miseries, to bring them out of this living death?

Yet that is not all. Have you got the will to surmount mountain-high obstructions? If the whole world stands against you sword in hand, would you still dare to do what you think is right? If your wives and children are against you, if all your money goes, your name dies, your wealth vanishes, would you still stick to it?

(Complete Works, Vol. 3: 226)

The last sentences describe nationalist world-renunciation. Vivekananda admonishes the Indian patriot to be willing to sacrifice everything, even family and wealth, for the sake of the nation. This exhortation resembles the total surrender that was asked of the *santans* in Bankim’s *Anandamath*.

Like the idea expressed in the last chapter of *Anandamath*, Vivekananda believes that India should be awakened through spirituality, spiritual knowledge, the kind of knowledge that India could even give to the rest of the world. In another lecture held at Madras Vivekananda exclaims:

We must go out, we must conquer the world through our spirituality and philosophy. There is no other alternative, we must do it or die. The only condition of national life, of awakened and vigorous national life, is the conquest of the world by Indian thought.

At the same time we must not forget that what I mean by conquest of the world by spiritual thought is the sending out of the life-giving principles, not the hundreds of superstitions that we have been hugging to our breasts for centuries. These have to be weeded out even on this soil, and thrown aside, so that they may die for ever. These are the causes of the degradation of the race and will lead to softening of the brain. That brain which cannot think high and noble thoughts, which has lost

all power of originality, which has lost all vigour, that brain which is always poisoning itself with all sorts of little superstitions passing under the name of religion, we must beware of.

(Complete Works, Vol. 3: 277–8)

Also here one hears the echoes of Keshub, Rammohun and Bankim when Vivekananda rejects what he calls ‘hundreds of superstitions’, for these must be ‘weeded out’. They have caused Indian degradation over the centuries. This is a common theme in nationalist rhetoric: the past has been bad because the nation has been weakened and betrayed its higher principles. Now is the time to repair the damage done in the past. Vivekananda warns that the

. . . problems in India are more complicated, more momentous, than the problems in any other country. Race, religion, language, government – all these together make a nation. The elements which compose the nations of the world are indeed very few, taking race after race, compared to this country. Here we have the Aryan, the Dravidian, the Tartar, the Turk, the Mogul, the European – all the nations of the world, as it were, pouring their blood into this land.

(Complete Works, Vol. 3: 286)

The Hindu past was not one of pure glory. Rather, Vivekananda maintains, it was also a period of undeserved privilege and glaring inequality. Speaking about the Brahmins, Vivekananda exclaims

We must be bold enough, must be brave enough to speak of their defects, but at the same time we must remember give the credit that is due to them. . . . it is no use fighting among the castes. What good will it do? It will divide us all the more, weaken us all the more, degrade us all the more. The days of exclusive privileges and exclusive claims are gone, gone for ever from the soil of India, and it is one of the great blessings of the British Rule in India. Even so to the Mohammedan Rule we owe that great blessing, the destruction of exclusive privilege. That Rule was, after all, not all bad; nothing is all bad, and nothing is all good. The Mohammedan conquest of India came as a salvation to the downtrodden, to the poor. That is why one-fifth of our people have become Mohammedans. It was not the sword that did it all. It would be the height of madness to think it was all the work of sword and fire.

(Complete Works, Vol. 3: 294)

Vivekananda does not criticise British rule, nor the Muslim rule of the late medieval times. On the contrary, he claims that because of Hindu high caste oppression, low-caste people voluntarily converted to Islam. The fact

that Vivekananda attributes the large number of Muslims in India to voluntary conversion, should be food for thought for the sympathisers of the Sangh Parivar.<sup>16</sup> The latter claims Vivekananda as its religious hero and at the same time regards Indian Muslims either as foreigners or as victims of forced conversion to Islam in the times of the Delhi Sultanates and the Moghuls.

On another occasion, Vivekananda expresses the same understanding of the Islamic past in India. In the same breath he comes down heavily on his educated Indian contemporaries whom he even calls traitors if they do not care for the Indian poor. Moreover, it is noteworthy that he does not condemn the Islamic past of India. Rather, he observes that the large numbers of converts to Islam was due to oppression by Hindu elites:

I call him a traitor who, having been educated, nursed in luxury by the heart's blood of the downtrodden millions of toiling poor, never even takes a thought for them. Where, in what period of history your rich men, noblemen, your priests and potentates took any thought for the poor – the grinding of whose faces is the very life-blood of their power?

But the Lord is great, the vengeance came sooner or later, and they who sucked the life-blood of the poor, whose very education was at their expense, whose very power was built on their poverty, were in their turn sold as slaves by hundreds and thousands, their wives and daughters dishonoured, their property robbed for the last 1,000 years, and do you think it was for no cause?

Why amongst the poor of India so many are Mohammedans? It is nonsense to say, they were converted by the sword. It was to gain their liberty from the . . . zemindars and from the . . . priest, and as a consequence you find in Bengal there are more Mohammedans than Hindus amongst the cultivators, because there were so many zemindars there. Who thinks of raising these sunken downtrodden millions? A few thousand graduates do not make a nation, a few rich men do not make a nation. True, our opportunities are less, but still there is enough to feed and clothe and make 300 millions more comfortable, nay, luxurious. Ninety per cent of our people are without education – who thinks of that? – these Babus, the so-called patriots?

(Complete Works, Vol. 8: 329–30)

These pronouncements sound like a programme of social and political reform. Elsewhere he says:

I consider that the great national sin is the neglect of the masses, and that is one of the causes of our downfall. No amount of politics would be of any avail until the masses in India are once more well educated, well fed, and well cared for.

(Complete Works, Vol. 5: 222–3)

He even called himself a socialist:<sup>17</sup>

I am a socialist not because I think it is a perfect system, but half a loaf is better than no bread.

(Complete Works, Vol. 6: 381)

And yet he did not have much sympathy for the reform movements of his own times. In a lecture called 'The Mission of the Vedanta' held in Kumbakonam, he stated:

For nearly the past one hundred years, our country has been flooded with social reformers and various social reform proposals. Personally, I have no fault to find with these reformers. Most of them are good, well-meaning men, and their aims too are very laudable on certain points; but it is quite a patent fact that this one hundred years of social reforms has produced no permanent and valuable result appreciable throughout the country . . . denunciations in volumes after volumes have been hurled upon the devoted head of the Hindu race and its civilisation, and yet no good practical result has been achieved; and where is the reason for that? The reason is not hard to find. It is in the denunciation itself. . . . I am sorry to say that most of our modern reform movements have been inconsiderate imitations of Western means and methods of work; and that surely will not do for India . . . denunciation is not at all the way to do good. That there are evils in our society even a child can see; and in what society are there no evils? . . . I have come to the conclusion that our people are on the whole the most moral and the most godly, and our institutions are, in their plan and purpose, best suited to make mankind happy. I do not, therefore, want any reformation. My ideal is growth, expansion, development on national lines.

(op. cit. vol. 3: 194-5)

In this passage Vivekananda defends the institutions of India as they are. He does not specify which ones he means but from the sequel it is quite clear that by 'our institutions' he means caste (cf. op. cit. vol. 3: 196-8). The modern reform movements that are about a century old cannot but mean the Brahmo Samaj in the times of Rammohun Roy. 'Denunciation' obviously refers to the social criticism uttered by Brahmos and the group of 'Young Bengal' around Derozio. In spite of the universalism of his Vedanta, Vivekananda was not opposed to the idea of caste.<sup>18</sup> He stated in a lecture called 'Vedanta and Its Application to Indian Life':

Caste is a natural order. . . . Caste is good. That is the only natural way of solving life. Men must form themselves into groups. . . . Wherever you go, there will be caste. But does that mean that there should be . . . privileges.

They should be knocked on the head . . . no privilege for any one, equal chances for all.

(op. cit. vol. 3: 245–6)

On the other hand, Vivekananda could also stretch the idea of caste to such an extent that it lost its hierarchical social meaning (based on ritual purity):

our solution of the caste question is not degrading those who are already high up, is not running amuck through food and drink, is not jumping out of our own limits in order to have more enjoyment, but it comes by every one of us, fulfilling the dictates of our Vedantic religion, by attaining spirituality, and by our becoming the ideal Brahmin.

(op. cit. vol. 3: 198)

The last word of Vivekananda is not social conservatism, as is shown quite credibly by Tapan Raychaudhuri. Raychaudhuri quotes a long passage in which Vivekananda lampoons Hindu conservatism and ‘mindless imbecilities of popular Hinduism’ (cf. Raychaudhuri 1998: 12–14). Vivekananda’s last word is the gospel of Vedanta, the gospel of individual self-perfection along lines similar to Bankim’s *anushilan* theory.

*Man is man so long as he is struggling to rise above nature*, and this nature is both internal and external. Not only does it comprise the laws that govern the particles of matter outside us and in our bodies, but also the more subtle nature within, which is, in fact, the motive power governing the external. It is good and very grand to conquer external nature, but grander still to conquer our internal nature. It is grand and good to know the laws that govern the stars and planets; it is infinitely grander and better to know the laws that govern passions, the feelings, the will, of mankind. This conquering of the inner man, understanding the secrets of the subtle workings that are within the human mind, and knowing its wonderful secrets, belong entirely to religion.

(Complete Works, Vol. 2: 64–5)

The last sentences summarise Vivekananda’s modernity theory in a religious sense. The ‘conquering of the inner man’ is nothing but the theory of Hinduism as self-culture proposed by Bankim.<sup>19</sup> Vivekananda is not as explicit as Bankim in applying this self-conquering to the building of a new Indian nation. But the motivating power of this and similar exhortations by Vivekananda was nevertheless felt in the years that followed. The translation of this Vedanta of modernity into the practice of political liberation was left to Aurobindo Ghose, a man who had moved in the circles around Vivekananda. Aurobindo’s political Vedantism was the practical application of personal development to the largest imaginable Indian Hindu collectivity: the Indian nation.

**The prophet of 'extremism', Arabindo Ghose/  
Sri Aurobindo (1872–1950)**

Even in Vivekananda's times the notion that India should sever all bands with Great Britain was hardly considered a serious proposition. There had been aborted attempts at revolt such as the Mutiny of 1857 and later the revolt by Phadke, referred to in the previous chapter. Vivekananda had roused a sense of modern Hindu pride and patriotism, but he did not campaign for national liberation, revolt or revolution. The novel *Anandamath* was an interesting exercise in patriotic fantasy, but not regarded as a scheme to be carried out in reality. The year 1885 witnessed the foundation of the Indian National Congress in Bombay. Its stated aims in 1885 were:

to enable all the most earnest labourers in the cause of national progress to become personally known to each other. . .

to discuss and decide upon the political operations to be undertaken during the ensuing year.

Indirectly this Conference will form the germ of a Native Parliament and . . . will constitute in a few years an unanswerable reply to the assertion that India is still wholly unfit for any form of representative institutions.

(Encyclopaedia of Indian National Congress, Vol. I, 1976: 39)

The foundation of the Congress marks the formal beginning of the nationalist movement in India. The Congress acted as the leading organisation in the Independence movement. As can be seen from this founding document, the Congress did aim at some form of parliamentary representation and Indian control over Indian affairs. Sometimes radical in tone, the yearly Congress remained a tame affair, invariably expressing gratitude for the British presence in India and the blessings of British rule. This compromising stance and the rather urban bourgeois background of the Congress can be seen in the speeches by its leading Indians who were known for their moderate views. The famous Sanskrit scholar and Hindu intellectual Rajendralal Mitra was elected to the chair when the Congress convened at Calcutta in 1886 (cf. op. cit.: 73). During the same convention Dadabhai Naoroji, the president of the convention, praised British rule:

It is under the civilising rule of the Queen and people of England that we meet here together . . . and are freely allowed to speak our minds without the least fear. . . . Such a thing is possible under . . . British rule only.  
(op. cit.: 125)

In fact, these words could have been uttered by Keshub who had been a staunch loyalist to Queen Victoria.<sup>20</sup> In the years that followed, the overall tone of the Congress remained loyalist and grateful for benefits conferred

by the British. More radically minded modernisers began to dislike the Congress politics of what they called 'mendicancy'. In the words of Sumit Sarkar the 'technique of appealing to British public opinion' was 'felt to be both futile and dishonourable'. The new slogans were 'self-reliance and constructive work' replacing the 'prayers and petitions' to the British rulers (Sarkar 1983: 97). The main trend within the then Congress is usually called 'moderate', the radical nationalist trend is still often called 'extremist'.<sup>21</sup> The 'extremist' trend, however, was the trend that pushed Indian independence forward, even if it did not directly cause it. The 'extremist' trend, as we will see, is ideologically related to the militant trend within Hindu modernity. The 'moderate' mentality owes much to the more loyalist Brahmo version of Hindu modernity. Although 'extremism' can be detected already in the 1890s according to Sumit Sarkar (1983: 97), it rose to prominence only after 1905, the year in which the Viceroy, Lord Curzon implemented the administrative partition of the large province of Bengal.

Who was the first and most prominent ideologue of 'extremism'? Arabindo was the third son of Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose, a convinced Anglo-ophile.<sup>22</sup> Born in Calcutta, Arabindo was sent to Loreto Convent School at Darjeeling when he was five. Arabindo's mother, Swarnalata, was the eldest daughter of Rajnarayan Bose, an old associate of Debendranath Tagore and himself an important figure in the Adi Brahmo Samaj. As a child Arabindo visited his famous maternal grandfather during holidays. In 1879 Dr. Krishna Dhan Ghose took his three sons to England for their education. The first years of his stay in London Arabindo was privately tutored by the Congregationalist minister William Drewett in his own house. Arabindo went to St. Paul's School in London. In 1890 he was admitted as a probationer to the prestigious Indian Civil Service. He began his study at Cambridge in 1890. In 1892 he was ready to pass the ICS examination but failed for the horse riding test.<sup>23</sup> Consequently, Arabindo was not accepted in the ICS. At the recommendation of James Cotton, secretary of the Liberal Club, Arabindo was employed as an administrator by the Maharaja of Baroda, Sir Sayajirao Gaekwar who was in London in 1892. On the 6th of February 1893 Arabindo landed in Bombay and joined the Baroda State Service on the 18th of February (cf. Purani 1995: 33–6).

Already in England Arabindo had conceived the idea to resist the British presence in India. He himself gives the following information on this but refers to himself in the third person as was his habit when speaking about himself:

Aurobindo began first to be interested in Indian politics. . . . His father began sending the newspaper *The Bengalee* with passages marked relating cases of maltreatment of Indians by Englishmen and he wrote letters denouncing the British Government in India as a heartless Government. At the age of eleven Aurobindo had already received strongly the impression that a period of general upheaval and great revolutionary changes



was coming in the world and he himself was destined to play a part in it. His attention was now drawn to India and this feeling was soon canalised into the idea of the liberation of his own country. But the 'firm decision' took full shape only towards the end of another four years.

(Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*: 3–4)

These were his feelings in England. Back in India he almost immediately set his mind to work on resistance.

### Articles in *Induprakash*

K. G. Deshpande, a Bombay barrister whom Arabindo knew in Cambridge, was editor of the English section of the Marathi paper *Induprakash*. Deshpande requested Arabindo to write some articles about the Indian National Congress for the English section (cf. Purani 1995: 40–1). Arabindo complied and wrote a series of articles under the heading 'New Lamps for Old'. In the first article in the *Induprakash* of 26 June 1893, entitled 'India and the British Parliament' Arabindo voices his disgust with the policy of mendicancy:

If we are indeed to renovate our country, we must no longer hold out supplicating hands to the English Parliament, like an infant crying to its nurse for a toy, but must recognise the hard truth that every nation must beat out its own path to salvation with pain and difficulty, and not rely on the tutelage of another.

(Sri Aurobindo 1996: 8)

It could not be said in clearer terms: India needs to stand on its own feet, free from the bonds of Empire. In the same article he refers to the alleged English sense of justice but remarks that the English

are not an incarnation of justice, neither are they an embodiment of morality . . . they like to think themselves . . . a just people and a moral people . . . certainly not by appealing to the English sense of justice . . . the Irish people have come within reach of obtaining some measure of redress for their grievances. Mr. Parnell<sup>24</sup> was enabled to force Mr. Gladstone's hand solely because he had built up a strong party . . . but we unfortunately have neither a Parnell nor a party with a purely Indian policy.

(op. cit.: 6–7)

Arabindo stresses a need for power politics against the British, for by mendicancy one is not likely to obtain any concessions. Appeals to the British Government whether in India or in London avail nothing. Arabindo exhorts his Indian readers to have a

sincere fellow-feeling – so far as it can be called sincere – with the silent and suffering people of India. I am sure that eventually the nobler part

of us will prevail . . . when we . . . return to the profession of a large and genuine patriotism.

(op. cit.: 17)

In the third instalment of 28 August Arabindo argues at some length that the Indian National Congress is not truly a national body, but represents 'not the mass of the population, but a single and very limited class' (op. cit.: 20). Even if the Congress were national 'it is not a popular body and has not in any way attempted to become a popular body' (op. cit.: 21). The Congress is an elitist coterie from which no serious challenges to British rule can be expected, because obviously the constituency of the Congress would lose all its benefits if it were to rise against British rule.

The answer to the liberation of India is a revolution like the French had experienced. Arabindo is not saying this very explicitly but the hints in the next passage can hardly be misunderstood:

For example . . . France . . . we know that the first step of that fortunate country towards progress was not through any decent and orderly expansion, but through a purification by blood and fire. It was not a convocation of respectable citizens, but the vast and ignorant proletariat, that emerged from a prolonged and almost coeval apathy and blotted out in five terrible years the accumulated oppression of thirteen centuries.

(op. cit.: 26–7)

France and the French Revolution of 1789 are to be the example India needs to follow. It is well known that Tory England had always been deeply opposed to the revolution of 1789 and had regarded revolutionary France as an enemy. Arabindo's other example is Ireland:

We do not read that the Irish leaders annually assembled to declaim glib orations, eulogistic of British rule and timidly suggestive of certain flaws in its unparalleled excellence, nor did they suggest as a panacea for Irish miseries, that they should be given more posts and an ampler career in the British service.

(op. cit.: 27)

Arabindo wants a popular revolution and spirit of revolt of the French and the Irish type, not the cooperation of the Indian elite with British rule. He admires the French more than the British and praises the

great vehement heart of the French populace – and that has ever beaten most highly in unison with the grand ideas of Equality and Fraternity, since they were first enounced on the banner of the great and terrible Republic.

(op. cit.: 34)

This passage occurs in instalment 5, dated 30 October 1893. In the same article Arabindo exclaims that the Indians are 'far more nearly allied to the French and Athenian than to the Anglo-Saxon' (op. cit.: 36). The next article reiterates revolutionary changes:

the workings of the Time-Spirit have made a genuine aristocracy obsolete and impracticable, and of the middle class, . . . its empire is passing away . . . but with the whole trend of humanity shaping towards democracy and socialism, on the calibre and civilisation of the lower class depends the future of the entire race.

(op. cit.: 41)

In Marxist terms of class-struggle, Arabindo is foreseeing the passing away of the rule of aristocracy and eventually that of the middle class as well. In India the end of aristocratic rule would have meant the end of large estates run by landlords and the abolishment of the princely states. Quite in line with democratic socialist expectations in Europe and the USA at the end of the nineteenth century, Arabindo predicts that the future of the world lies with the lower classes. These classes would make a revolution that would usher in democracy and socialism. As we have seen earlier, Swami Vivekananda also made references to socialism a few years after these articles by Arabindo had appeared. In the rest of the article Arabindo again mentions the French workers and peasants and their 'sanity' and 'direct ways of life and thought' (op. cit.: 42) as exemplifying the strong and promising traits of character in the French nation. Arabindo contrasts these positively with the British character.

Of course Arabindo does not give a call to revolution in these articles, but the 'seditious' tone is unmistakable. Criticising British rule, glorifying the French Revolution of 1789, admiring the French workers and peasants and proclaiming that the future 'of the entire race', i.e. of humanity, lies with democracy and socialism; all this comes pretty close to preparing the Indian readers of his writings for a more radical social and political change than the Indian National Congress was able or willing to provide. In none of these articles, published between June 1893 and March 1894, Arabindo ever specifically referred to Hinduism or even religion in general. There is some hint of Indian culture and its relevance for Indians in instalment 7, of 4 December 1893. Arabindo discusses the problem of introducing and adopting Western ideas into India. He calls this introduction 'occidentalism'.<sup>25</sup>

No one will deny . . . that for us who have a strong affection for oriental things and believe that there is in them a great deal that is beautiful, a great deal that is serviceable, a great deal that is worth keeping, the most important objective is and must inevitably be the admission into India of occidental ideas, methods and culture: even if we are

ambitious to conserve what is sound and beneficial in our indigenous civilisation, we can only do so by assisting very largely the influx of Occidentalism.

(op. cit.: 45)

The 'affection for oriental things' may very well mean Hinduism, but Arabindo does not use that word here. A great deal of Indian civilisation can be 'beautiful', 'serviceable' and 'worth keeping', therefore it must be conserved, but not in total isolation from Western influences. The phrase 'our indigenous civilisation' can be a veiled reference to Hinduism. In essence this passage is similar to the last passages of *Anandamath* where true Hinduism has to wait until Western sciences have been sufficiently learned (cf. Chapter 5). In later writings Arabindo is explicit about Hinduism. The Western ideas in the previously quoted passage may be understood to refer to democracy, socialism and political revolution. These, as is clear from the context of these articles, are the Western things that may assist in preserving and modernising Indian civilisation. In the sequel of the same article Arabindo repeatedly mentions the upliftment of the 'proletariate' as a pressing need for the future. In these articles Arabindo sketched the outline of future leftist politics in India: a political revolution amounting to overthrowing British rule, and a social revolution aiming at the economic and cultural upliftment of the Indian 'masses', in Arabindo's parlance the 'proletariate'. The explicit connection between this revolution and reformed Vedantist Hinduism came later in Arabindo's thinking. He made a first attempt at linking revolution and Hinduism (actually Vedantist doctrines) in a series of articles on Bankimchandra Chatterjee for the same *Induprakash* published in July and August 1894.

### In praise of Bankim

In 1894 Bankim had died and Arabindo – who in the meantime had studied Bankim's novels and philosophical writings – wished to preserve in public memory Bankim's accomplishments in Bengali literature. Arabindo assesses Bankim's role in what he calls 'the return to Hinduism' and the 'waning influence of the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj' (Sri Aurobindo, *The Harmony of Virtue*: 99).

Already we see the embryo of a new generation soon to be with us, whose imagination Bankim has caught and who care not for Keshab Chandra Sen . . . a generation national to a fault, loving Bengal and her new glories, and if not Hindus themselves, yet zealous for the honour of the ancient religion and hating all that makes war on it. With that generation the future lies and not with the Indian Unnational Congress or the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj.

(op. cit.: 99–100)

The older reform movement of Hinduism, the Brahmo Samaj, is now a thing of the past, in Arabindo's estimation. It is noteworthy that Arabindo thinks even non-Hindus would defend 'the honour of the ancient religion'. The 'new generation' must be those that have adopted Bankim's Hinduism rather than Brahmoism or the politics of the Congress. The dig at Brahmoism is understandable in this connection. Prominent Brahmos took a keen interest in the Congress. It was their political debating club. Arabindo now expects the younger generation to be fed up with the tame and obedient Brahmoism of their parents. So they would turn to the more radically Hindu Bankim. As Arabindo is writing in 1894 his idol of Hinduism is not yet Swami Vivekananda. Instead Arabindo portrays Bankim as the successor to the Hindu reforms begun by Rammohun:

In religion . . . the Bengali has the future in his hands. He was the first to revolt against the shortcomings of Hinduism, and he is the first who has attempted to give some shape to that new Hinduism, which is, one feels, his religious destiny. He has sojourned for some time in the religious thought of the foreigner, but he is now coming back to the creed of his fathers with strange and precious gifts in his hands.

(op. cit.: 100)

The last sentence seems to be an indictment of Brahmoism. Arabindo is suggesting that Brahmoism is a kind of Christianity, the religion of the 'foreigners'. And yet this 'ancient religion' of Hinduism is also a 'new Hinduism'. It was Bankim who first gave 'shape' to this new Hinduism. And the old 'creed' of the 'fathers' is enhanced by 'strange and precious gifts'. It is the old religion in a reformed shape. Arabindo does not propose a blind return to the past, but looks forward to a future Hinduism shaped by Bankim.

Arabindo stayed in the service of Baroda until 1907. A year after his articles on Bankim, Arabindo brought out a volume of poetry in English *Songs to Myrtilla* followed by *Urvasie*, a narrative poem in 1896. Some of these poems were already written in England. From 1897 Arabindo was professor of English and lecturer in French at Baroda College. The themes of his poems between 1890 and 1900 show a strong influence of Sanskrit and classical Greek literature.<sup>26</sup> Between 1893 and 1900 Arabindo intensified his study of Sanskrit, Bengali and even learned some Marathi and Gujarati. From his published works it is evident that his preference lay with the canonical texts of Brahmoist Vedanta. These were the small Upanishads: Isha, Kena, Katha, Mundaka, Mandukya, Shvetashvatara (with the exception of the Shvetashvatara, the same texts that Rammohun had translated almost a century earlier; also Debendranath used these texts in the first part of his Brahmo Dharma). Arabindo began to translate them again into English. He had a special predilection for the Isha, to which he devoted lengthy discussions. The same is true for the Kena. Arabindo published his

interpretations of the Bhagavad Gita between 1916 and 1920 under the title 'Essays on the Gita'. This shows that Arabindo's canon of Hindu scriptures was simply combining Rammohun's and Bankim's Hindu canons, namely the small Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita. Arabindo's substantial exegetical writings about the Upanishads and the Gita continue – in a more sophisticated fashion than his predecessors – a nineteenth-century reformed Hindu tradition, namely basing Hinduism on a few classical Vedantic scriptures. Arabindo disparaged Brahmoism as a social phenomenon, he did not deviate from the Hindu canon of Brahmoism. Of course, the Bhagavad Gita never really formed part of the Brahmo canon. The Gita stood on its own and for Bankim constituted the prime source-text for the modernisation of Hinduism.

### Temple of the mother, *Bhawani Mandir*

When Arabindo began writing on Hinduism (which he often designated 'Vedantism') and Indian national liberation, it was still some years before the writings on the Upanishads and the Gita. After almost a decade of poetry, the first political writing after 'New Lamps for Old' was the pamphlet *Bhawani Mandir* (Temple for the Goddess).<sup>27</sup> In this pamphlet Arabindo for the first time explicitly blended Indian nationalism with (Hindu) Vedantism and the Goddess-theology and imagery which he partly adopted from Bankim's *Anandamath* and the hymn *Vande Mataram*, as well as the theology of the *Devimahatmya* itself.<sup>28</sup> By 1905 when the pamphlet was written, Arabindo had thoroughly digested the teachings of Bankim, the Gita, the Upanishads, and he regarded Swami Vivekananda and Sri Ramakrishna as great modern Hindu luminaries. Years later Arabindo stated that the idea of *Bhawani Mandir* was mostly his younger brother Barin's (cf. Purani 1995: 66; Sri Aurobindo, *On Himself*: 51).

*Bhawani Mandir* may not be a large and theoretically sophisticated work, it is an important landmark in the nationalist upheaval that followed upon it. The pamphlet obviously did not cause the rise of Hindu nationalism. Rather it was a comparatively well-written and accessible formulation of it.<sup>29</sup> The very first sentence of *Bhawani Mandir* evokes the *Anandamath* scenery of a temple of *santans* devoted to the work of the Mother Goddess:

A Temple is to be erected and consecrated to Bhawani, the Mother, among the hills. To all the children of the Mother the call is sent forth to help in the sacred work.

(Sri Aurobindo 1996: 65)

No one acquainted with Bankim's novel, could have missed the allusion to the *santans'* hideout. In the next passage Bhawani is called the 'Infinite Energy, which streams forth from the Eternal' (op. cit.: 65). At this moment

India, 'the ancient Mother', is weak because 'we', the Indians, 'are empty of strength' (op. cit.: 66). So what ails the Indians?

Many of us, utterly overcome by Tamas, the dark and heavy demon of inertia, are saying nowadays that it is impossible, that India is decayed, bloodless and lifeless, too weak ever to recover; that our race is doomed to extinction. It is a foolish and idle saying. No man or nation need be weak unless he chooses, no man or nation need perish unless he deliberately chooses extinction.

(op. cit.: 69)

Arabindo speaks the language of nationalist exhortation: we are weak now, but this is due to ourselves. We should strive to become strong. We should *choose* to become strong and exert ourselves. This is substantially the message of Bankim's *anushilan*. Upon this exhortation follows a definition of the Indian nation in which Arabindo evokes the imagery of the Mother Goddess of Bankim's poem *Vande Mataram*. The strength of the nation/Mother lies in the hands of all the inhabitants, by now grown to three hundred million:

For what is a nation? What is our mother-country? It is not a piece of earth, nor a figure of speech, nor a fiction of the mind. It is a mighty Shakti, composed of the Shaktis of all the millions of units that make up the nation, just as Bhawani Mahisha Mardini sprang into being from the Shakti of all the millions of gods assembled in one mass of force and welded into unity. The Shakti we call India, Bhawani Bharati, is the living unity of the Shaktis of three hundred million people; but she is inactive, imprisoned in the magic circle of Tamas, the self-indulgent inertia and ignorance of her sons. To get rid of Tamas we have but to wake Brahma within.

(op. cit.: 69)

Arabindo does not only invoke Bankim, he also refers to the second chapter of the *Devimahatmya* which describes how from the bodies of the assembled Gods issues forth splendour (*tejas*). The various rays of this splendour formed a huge mountain of light out of which steps the Goddess possessing all the powers (*shaktis*) of the assembled Gods (*Devimahatmya* II: 9–33). She is Durga, riding a lion, and doing battle with Mahishasura, the Demon in the shape of a buffalo. The same militant Goddess Arabindo wants to invoke once more. She has to issue forth from the collective action of all Indians (again Indian Muslims are included as in Bankim's *Vande Mataram*).<sup>30</sup>

In the next passage Arabindo returns to Vedanta and world-renouncers as the source of the new Hinduism that should motivate the Indians to build the nation:

What is it that so many thousands of holy men, Sadhus and Sannyasis, have preached to us silently by their lives? What was the message that

radiated from the personality of Bhagawan Ramakrishna Paramhansa? What was it that formed the kernel of the eloquence with which the lion-like heart of Vivekananda sought to shake the world? It is this, that in every one of these three hundred millions of men, from the Raja on his throne to the coolie at his labour, from the Brahmin absorbed in his Sandhya to the Pariah walking shunned of men, GOD LIVETH. We are all gods and creators, because the energy of God is within us and all life is creation; not only the making of new forms is creation, but preservation is creation, destruction itself is creation.

(op. cit.: 70)

Note the fact that Arabindo explicitly draws in Sri Ramakrishna and Swami Vivekananda as witnesses to this gospel of Vedantist national Hinduism: The nation includes all, from high to low, because the one God dwells in all equally. Indians need not be passive receivers of political decisions from above, for they are 'all gods and creators'. Arabindo blends the immanent divinity of Vedanta with the symbol of the Goddess as spiritual and physical power. For the 'Brahma within, the one and indivisible ocean of spiritual force is that from which all life, material and mental, is drawn' (op. cit.: 73). The rest of the pamphlet gives a broad outline of a hermitage (*math*)<sup>31</sup> that should become the centre from which the spiritual and national regeneration of India is to be undertaken. The burden to accomplish this rests with those who have renounced the social world. In the pamphlet they are called by their usual Hindu term *sannyasis*, i.e. those who follow the discipline of *brahmacharya* (chastity and study). The latter term usually refers to the first stage in Hindu life, at which young men live as celibates with a teacher who instructs them in the Vedas. It is important that Arabindo reserves the role of workers for national upliftment to world-renouncers. Thus we have the outline of theoretical Hindu modernity here: modern Hinduism is embodied in the teachings and scriptures of Vedanta; the modernisation of Indian society on the basis of Vedanta should be taken up by special propagandists who can rely on the spiritual charisma and authority that only world-renunciation can convey. In short: Hindu modernity is the realm of individualistic Vedanta and world-renunciation for a collective national purpose.

*Bhawani Mandir* does not contain any call to arms, nor does it outline any concrete revolutionary actions. Rather, it shows in unequivocal terms that Indian nation-building has to proceed from the internalisation of Vedantist doctrine coupled to a belief in the Mother Goddess and the practice of world-renunciation – sacrificing one's social comfort for the welfare of the nation. British intelligence reports, however, described *Bhawani Mandir* as dangerous and seditious. James Campbell Ker who published his book (a printed report marked confidential) on the early phase of revolutionary activity in British India in 1917, reproduces the whole text of *Bhawani Mandir* (Ker: 34–43), and rightly attributes the authorship to Arabindo (op. cit.: 34). The Rowlatt Committee Report devotes a whole paragraph to *Bhawani Mandir*.



The report states that the pamphlet ‘cleverly associated the religious and political aspects of the question from the point of view of so-called Indian Nationalism’ (par. 94). It wrongly suggests that Bhawani is a name of Goddess Kali, but this is beside the point. The British regarded this pamphlet as indeed any association of religion with politics as dangerous fanaticism (cf. Heehs 1993: 69). *Bhawani Mandir* was not unimportant but the most often cited and read publication was the English language nationalist newspaper *Bande Mataram*. Where *Bhawani Mandir* gave a single punch, the *Bande Mataram* gave a volley of punches running into hundreds of pages of print.

### *Bande Mataram*

The paper *Bande Mataram* was started in July 1906 by the Bengali nationalist politician Bipin Chandra Pal. Arabindo – being appointed at the Bengal National College in Calcutta in 1906 – began writing in the new paper. After a struggle for power between supporters of Bipin Pal and Arabindo, the latter won and from November 1906 took charge of the paper (cf. Heehs 1993: 92–3). The paper could cater to a growing anti-British sentiment. On 16 October 1905 the long-proposed partition of the province of Bengal into two separate provinces of West and East Bengal went into effect. The move was an administrative and political measure of the British Indian government. It boosted anti-British Indian nationalism (at least more on the Hindu side). Arabindo made good use of the changed public mood and the ensuing movement to boycott the sale of British industrial goods in the hinterland of Bengal, and the boycott of governmental educational institutions (Sarkar 1973: 43–6, 137–48). The *Bande Mataram* now effectively became the mouthpiece of the radical nationalist Left with Arabindo as one of its main ideologues (cf. op. cit.: 6).

Arabindo’s numerous editorials show an astute mixture of anti-colonial nationalism based on the idea of self-help and Vedantist ideas of collective self-realisation. In the issue of 11 April 1907 he states:

The attempt at self-development by self-help is absolutely necessary for our national salvation, whether we can carry it peacefully to the end or not. In no other way can we get rid of the fatal dependence, passivity and helplessness in which a century of all-pervasive British control has confirmed us. To recover the habit of independent motion and independent action is the first necessity.

(Sri Aurobindo 1996: 124)

This ‘pervasive British control’ which stifled all independent action on the part of Indians, was only matched by Britain’s draining India’s economic wealth. On 12 April Arabindo wrote:

The huge price India has to pay England for the inestimable privilege of being ruled by Englishmen is a small thing compared with the murderous drain by which we purchase the more exquisite privilege of being

exploited by British capital. . . . The only possible method of stopping the drain is to establish a popular government which may be relied on to foster and protect Indian commerce and Indian industry conducted by Indian capital and employing Indian labour.

(op. cit.: 127)

This evocation of the ‘drain of wealth’ by Britain is followed by a surreptitious but perceptible call to revolution, to the overthrow of the colonial government, in language reminiscent of the American Declaration of Independence of 1776.<sup>32</sup>

Organised resistance in subject nations which mean to live and not to die, can have no less object than an entire and radical change of the system of Government; only by becoming responsible to the people and drawn from the people can the Government be turned into a protector instead of an oppressor.

(op. cit.: 128)

What India needs is ‘a free national Government unhampered even in the least degree by foreign control’ (op. cit.: 128). From the passage about the ‘drain of wealth’ it is clear that Arabindo thought of the middle class as the prime movers of the revolution, for he demands that ‘Indian commerce’ and ‘Indian industry’ be ‘conducted by Indian capital’. That ‘Indian labour’ would be employed was no surprise. But that the control over the economy and the nascent industrialisation should be in Indian hands can only mean that Arabindo was hoping for the social hegemony of the Indian middle class, perhaps more specifically, of the Hindu middle class. On 13 April Arabindo repeated his call to revolution and brought in the Bhagavad Gita as a religious support for his call:

no nation yet has listened to the cant of the oppressor when itself put to the test, and the general conscience of humanity approves the refusal. . . . To shrink from bloodshed and violence . . . is a weakness deserving as severe a rebuke as Sri Krishna addressed to Arjuna when he shrank from the colossal civil slaughter on the field of Kurukshetra. Liberty is the life-breath of a nation; and when the life is attacked . . . any and every means of self-preservation becomes right and justifiable.

(op. cit.: 135)

Like Bankim Arabindo does not hesitate to approve of violent means for the higher goal of self-preservation. The Bhagavad Gita with its military setting offered an ideal Hindu canonical legitimization for the use of arms to preserve the nation. This self-preservation means also

absolute Swaraj, – self-government as it exists in the United Kingdom. We believe that no smaller ideal can inspire national revival or nerve

the people of India for the fierce, stubborn and formidable struggle by which alone they can again become a nation.

(op. cit.: 155)

Arabindo places before his readers the goal of the most radical section of the nationalists: complete independence to be won through long and arduous struggle. There is no room for compromise or coming to some sort of understanding with British rule: it must simply be overthrown by force. A few weeks later, Arabindo defines the goal of nationalism:

India, can, should and will become a great, free and united nation. [Nationalism] . . . is not a negative current of destruction, but a positive, constructive impulse towards the making of *modern* [emphasis added] India.

(op. cit.: 166)

Building a *modern* unified India is the real goal of anti-colonial nationalism. Arabindo adds that this means 'Democratic Nationalism' (op. cit.: 166). Arabindo brings together modernity, nationalism and democracy as the destiny of future India. In numerous editorials throughout 1907 and 1908, Arabindo touched on many questions of Indian nationhood, unity and liberty. In the issue of 2 May 1907 Arabindo discussed the unity of Hindu India. He observed that some people regarded this unity as 'uniformity' but this is clearly impossible because of the 'very nature of the human mind' (op. cit.: 179). His first example of a Hindu attempt at forming unity and modernity is the Brahmo Samaj.

The Brahmo Samaj . . . was set on foot in India by Rammohan Roy with the belief that this would be the one religion of India which would replace and unite the innumerable sects now dividing our spiritual consciousness.

(op. cit.: 179)

The Brahmo Samaj failed in its attempts at unifying Hindus, because it sought to substitute the different sects by a religion 'based on the common truths of Hinduism' (op. cit.: 179). Arabindo thus dismisses the Brahmo Samaj's attempts at Protestantisation of Hinduism. In Arabindo's view the correct road to Hindu unity lies in creating a feeling of 'community of spiritual truths and discipline' and a common 'valuing and cherishing the Hindu religion' (op. cit.: 179). The difference with the earlier Brahmo attempts seem to lie in the emphasis Arabindo puts on feeling and valuing, that is, on emotions rather than on doctrines and congregational organisation.

Arabindo began to view the growth of the national movement as a divine intervention. In April 1907 he wrote about India's national awakening:

Before her now lies the valley of the shadow of death full of trials and unknown perils and temptations, but the light that leads her cannot fail;

the inspiration of the Power that gives her strength is irresistible. . . . There is a Divinity that has been shaping her ends – no mere might of man.

(op. cit.: 213)

Not only is the ‘valley of the shadow of death’ a direct reference to the Biblical Psalm 23:4 in the King James version, it also refers to Bunyan’s *Pilgrim’s Progress* in which it denotes a passage through a fearful area. But God leads on His people. In terms suggestive of the book of Exodus Arabindo predicts that God will lead India into liberty and independence. In another article Arabindo detracts from the religious divisions between Hindus and Muslims, and links modern Indian religious thinking to the European Reformation:

Who does not deny the difficulty created by divisions between the Mahomedans and Hindus, but it is idle to say that the difficulty is insuperable. If the spirit of nationalism conquered the much fiercer intolerance of the religious struggles in Europe after the reformation, it is not irrational to hope as much for India in the twentieth century.

(op. cit.: 222–3)

Arabindo’s observation that nationalism in Europe was less fierce than the struggles that had accompanied the Reformation may be considered inadequate in the light of subsequent European history with two world wars. Arabindo tried to sell this idea in order to indicate that Hindus and Muslims ought to overcome their antagonism. But the real answer to overcome religious weaknesses such as ‘abuses and superstitions’ is ‘through a transformation of spirit’ (op. cit.: 229), as Arabindo maintains in the editorial of 20 September 1907, significantly entitled ‘The Unhindu Spirit of Caste Rigidity’.

We must educate every Indian, man, woman and child, in the ideals of our religion and philosophy before we can rationally expect our society to reshape itself in the full and perfect spirit of the Vedantic gospel of equality. . . . Education on a national scale is an indispensable precondition of our social amelioration. . . . The Nationalist . . . knows that in order that his ideal of equality may be brought to its fullest fruition, he must first bring about political freedom and federation of his country.

(op. cit.: 229–30)

Education on a national scale is the precondition for propagating the foundation of modern Hindu religion, namely Vedantic equality. Social equality is part and parcel of the gospel of Vedantism. It must be based on political freedom. Thus, the political independence is the precondition for the modernisation of India. Political independence is the first and immediate goal of anti-colonial nationalism. Arabindo explicitly calls this nationalism a religion, tacitly equating it with Vedantic Hinduism. In a speech delivered

in Bombay on 19 January 1908, Arabindo claims that God is the originator of Indian nationalism:

Nationalism survives in the strength of God and it is not possible to crush it. . . . Nationalism is immortal; Nationalism cannot die; because it is no human thing. It is God who is working in Bengal.

(op. cit.: 252)

In the same speech Arabindo made direct reference to Sri Ramakrishna as the 'founder' of the Hindu religious upsurge in Bengal:

In Bengal there came a flood of religious truth. Certain men were born, men whom the educated world would not have recognised if that belief, if that God within them had not been there to open their eyes, men whose lives were very different from what our education, our Western education, taught us to admire. One of them, the man who had the greatest influence and has done the most to regenerate Bengal, could not read and write a single word.

(op. cit.: 254)

Arabindo stresses the fact that this special man was a world-renouncer for he 'lived on the alms of others' (op. cit.: 254). This is factually untrue as Sri Ramakrishna was a salaried priest in the temple of Dakshineswar. That he could not read nor write is also not true. Sri Ramakrishna could read Bengali and write it also. He could not read or write English. That is perhaps what Arabindo had wanted to say. But that is not the point. Arabindo wanted to emphasise that Sri Ramakrishna, the source of new Hinduism, was an 'ascetic' (op. cit.: 255). For this reason he could – in the minds of the audience – be associated with the sphere of transcendence, the sphere where God can be found, outside the pale of the Hindu social world. This is an important point, as it shows the way out of 'Hindu Caste Rigidity'. The Hindu social world with its elaborate hierarchies is abandoned in favour of Vedantic equality. The latter is supposed to be the great goal of the India of the future. World-renunciation is the sphere where all this is already available. Arabindo gives another example of world-renunciation, namely that of Bijoy Krishna Goswami, an erstwhile disciple of Keshub who turned to Vaishnavism. Bipin Chandra Pal became the 'disciple of a *sannyasin*' (op. cit.: 255), namely of Bijoy Krishna Goswami. Arabindo continues his paean on nationalism. The God who inspires it is none other than Krishna:

without the lesson of selflessness, without the moral force of self-sacrifice, God within us cannot grow. Sri Krishna cannot grow to manhood unless he is called upon to work for others.

(op. cit.: 258)

## Anushilan Samitis and Alipore Bomb Case

How could Hindu revolution be carried out in reality? This question had been answered in Bankim's *Anandamath*. Military action was the only solution available to Hindu imagination at that time. The point was, how to begin? In the last decades of the nineteenth century, some Bengali gentlemen in Calcutta formed secret societies. These societies were modelled after the Italian Carbonari and Mazzini's Young Italy Society (cf. Heehs 1994: 534). Rabindranath Tagore has given a somewhat comical description in his *Jivansmṛti* of one of these Calcuttan secret societies of which he himself was a member:

Through the efforts of Jyotidada we had a society of which the elderly Rajnarayan babu was the chairman. It was a patriotic (*svadeśik*) society. This society used to convene in a deserted house in some alley of Calcutta. All the proceedings of this society were surrounded by secrecy. In fact, this confidentiality was its only claim to danger. In our dealings there was nothing that posed a danger to the King or his subjects. What we were up to and where, during the afternoons, also our relatives did not know. Our doors were closed, our room was dark, our initiation was with a verse from the Ṛg Veda, our discussions were hush hush. Because of this, all were thrilled; except excitement there was little else. Even a youngster like myself was fit to be a member of this society. In it we were in the midst of a hot wind of such frenzy, that we were borne aloft in enthusiasm on a daily basis. We did not feel any shame, fear or hesitation. Our main task in this society was to warm ourselves at the fires of encouragement.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, IX: 463)

It is perhaps needless to point out that this society consisted only of reformed Hindus. Rajnarayan Basu was a famous Brahmo leader and he was Arabindo's maternal grandfather. Jyotirindranath, Rabindranath's elder brother, belonged to the same religious denomination as his father, as did Rabindranath himself. The proceedings of this and similar societies obviously did not lead to much except pious intentions and frothy talk.

The real change came in 1902. In February or March of that year, Satish Chandra Basu started a modest club for physical training for young men, in Madan Mitra Lane in North Calcutta. At the suggestion of his friend Narendra Chandra Bhattacharya, the club was named *Anushilan Samiti*, 'Cultural Society' after the *anushilan* doctrine evolved by Bankim in his *Dharmatattva*.<sup>33</sup> The Calcutta-based barrister Pramatha Nath Mitra was invited to lead the *Samiti*. In this time-span Arabindo's emissary Jatin Banerji came from Baroda with a more rigorous plan to set up secret societies to prepare the ground for revolution. As a result of Jatin's action, on 24 March 1902, an expanded *Anushilan Samiti* was started. Satish's just-founded club merged

with Jatin's. The new location was now 108 Upper Circular Road, Calcutta. It quickly became the centre of Calcutta's attempts at revolution (see Heehs 1993: 32–3). Pramatha Nath Mitra instructed the young recruits in political and military history, the French Revolution and the lives of Mazzini and Garibaldi. Sister Nivedita, the Irish disciple of Swami Vivekananda, roused the Indian patriotic feelings of the young men and donated her books on revolutionary history. Jatin practised military drills with them. He carried out Arabindo's long-term plan to organise armed resistance to the British Raj (Heehs 1993: 33–4).

Sister Nivedita was an Irishwoman named Margaret Noble. She had met Vivekananda in 1895 in England and in 1898 came to Calcutta as his disciple. There she started a school for Bengali girls. Between 1899 and 1901 she changed her mind about loyalty to the British Empire, while under the growing influence of the famous Russian anarchist Peter Kropotkin (for details see Heehs 1994: 537–8). At around the same time, the Japanese art-critic Kakuzo Okakura visited India to study – among others – the remnants of ancient Buddhist architecture and art in India. Okakura is credited with having suggested to Bengali intellectuals in Calcutta with whom he came in contact, to rise up against the British (see Heehs 1994: 539–40). Okakura was a Buddhist with leanings towards Advaita Vedanta. He regarded Vedanta as the (theological) essence of Hinduism. India, in his view, should wake up to a new dynamic Vedanta which would be another form of Buddhism adapted to the demands of modern India. India should follow Japan's example, in other words, India should develop its own Meiji restoration (cf. van Bijlert 2003: 29–31). The real extent of Nivedita's and Okakura's direct involvement with the nascent *Anushilan Samiti* is 'hard to determine and much controversy surrounds it' (Heehs 1994: 540). Okakura stayed in India only for some months in 1902 and consequently could not have been much involved in the *Anushilan Samiti*. Nivedita does not seem to have actively participated in the terrorist activities of the *Samiti* (cf. Heehs 1994: 541).

The turning point came after 1905 as in that year the division of Bengal was effected by the colonial government. Hence from 1906 Arabindo's calls to revolution were taken more and more seriously and consequently were put into practice. In 1907 Arabindo's younger brother Barin had gathered a group of potential guerrilla fighters around him at a place in North-Calcutta called Maniktola (cf. Heehs 1993: 104 ff). This group tried to commit several political assaults, among others on the Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Sir Andrew Fraser, who escaped the attempts. Another important target was the much-hated chief presidency magistrate Douglas Kingsford who had passed harsh judgements on several Indian nationalists on trial for sedition. The attempt to kill him was carried out by two of Barin's pupils: Khudiram Bose and Prafulla Chaki. They made the attempt in April 1908 at Muzaffarpur by throwing a homemade bomb at what they thought was the carriage of Kingsford. It so happened that the passengers of the carriage were two British ladies who were killed instead. Prafulla committed

suicide while being pursued by the police. Khudiram was caught, tried and hanged. This bomb case caused a furore in British India and beyond. The police tried to find the originators of this attempt. In the Maniktola garden the police found much incriminating evidence for prosecution of the whole group around Barin, including Arabindo. The police suspected that Arabindo was the real instigator behind the guerrilla group. At least he was the theoretician who breathed sedition in the *Bande Mataram*. The whole group, including Arabindo, was arrested and taken undertrial prisoner in the Alipore Jail in Calcutta. The bomb case and the subsequent trial were henceforth known as the Alipore Bomb Case.<sup>34</sup>

The case was a watershed, not only in the struggle for Indian independence, but also for Arabindo personally. Since the British could not find any tangible evidence of Arabindo's involvement in the bomb case, he was acquitted almost one year later on 6 May 1909. During his imprisonment Arabindo had further deepened his practice of yoga which he had begun under the guidance of the Maharashtrian yogi Vishnu Bhaskar Lele in January 1908 (cf. Purani 1995: 97). In Alipore Jail Arabindo – while practising his yoga – felt guided by Vivekananda (cf. op. cit.: 114). He later maintained to have meditated in jail 'with the help of the Upanishads' and 'practiced the Yoga of the Gita' (op. cit.: 115).

### Nationalism is Hinduism

On 30 May 1909, a few weeks after his release, Arabindo delivered a speech at Uttarpara, a few miles north of Calcutta. In this speech Arabindo talked about his favourite subject: Indian nationalism based on the Vedanta. Subsequently a written version was published in the journal *Karmayogin* that Arabindo had started in June of 1909. According to biographer A. B. Purani, the speech at Uttarpara is 'openly a description of Sri Aurobindo's spiritual experience while in jail' (1995: 117). Arabindo himself regarded the imprisonment as 'a year of seclusion and of training' and he saw himself as 'God's instrument, however weak that instrument might be' (Sri Aurobindo 1996: 368). In jail Arabindo had felt that God trained him to do God's work:

Then He placed the Gita in my hands. I was able not only to understand intellectually but to realise what Sri Krishna demanded of Arjuna and what He demands of those who aspire to do His work. . . [namely] to have an equal heart for high and low, friend and opponent, success and failure.

(op. cit.: 369–70)

Arabindo could mention the Bhagavad Gita as a modern Hindu canon. The Gita could be used as such for two reasons: (1) because Sri Krishna's teaching is meant to motivate Arjuna not to shun battle; (2) because the Gita



teaches a form of inner world-renunciation that fits the situation in which the imprisoned revolutionaries find themselves, for they had given up their social existence – as Arabindo himself also did – to serve the country. Much more than the quietistic Upanishads, the ethos of the Gita helps the revolutionaries to cope with a war-like situation. World-renunciation does not necessarily lead to quietism. The world-renunciation of the Gita leads to accepting the vicissitudes of battle. This was a message similar to the implications Bankim had extracted from the Gita.

Arabindo continues his speech with a description (which has become rather famous) of how Vasudeva (another name of Krishna) permeates all and everyone, from the thieves and dacoits in the jailground, to the Magistrate and the prosecuting counsel (cf. op. cit.: 370–2). In jail Arabindo was made by God to see the truth ‘of the Hindu religion’, the ‘truth of the Vedas, the truth of the Gita’, the ‘mighty truth in this religion based on the Vedanta’ (op. cit.: 373). God tells Arabindo: ‘I am in the nation and its uprising and I am Vasudeva . . . and what I will, shall be’ (op. cit.: 372). Moreover, God has reserved a messianic role for independent India:

It is this religion [i.e. the Hindu religion] that I am raising before the world, it is this that I have perfected . . . through . . . rishis, saints and *avatars*, and now it is going forth to do my work among the nations. . . . This is the sanatana dharma . . . which I have revealed to you.

(op. cit.: 374)

The term *sanātana dharma* is Sanskrit (meaning ‘eternal religion’). The text seems to allude once more to the last passage of *Anandamath*. Arabindo elucidates further his concept of *sanātana dharma*:

It is the one religion which impresses on mankind the closeness of God to us and embraces . . . all the possible means by which man can approach God. It is the one religion which insists . . . on the truth which all religions acknowledge, that He is in all men and all things and that in Him we move and have our being.

(op. cit.: 375)

Arabindo – like Rammohun, Keshub, Bankim and Vivekananda – is trying to bring the whole of humankind under a single religious umbrella. For creating unity in the imagination of the Indian people, it is useful to suggest that peoples of all religious denominations can find shelter under something like universalist Vedanta. Arabindo seems to merge Vedanta with New Testament theology in the last sentence: ‘He is in all men and all things’ is the Vedantic teaching of the omnipresent Brahman; ‘in Him we move and have our being’ comes from Acts 17:28, from the speech that Paul delivers to the Athenians to announce that the God of the gospel is the same as

the Athenians' 'unknown God'. Towards the end Arabindo identifies Indian nationalism with this *sanatana dharma*:

I say no longer that Nationalism is a creed, a religion, a faith; I say that it is sanatana dharma which for us is Nationalism. This Hindu nation was born with the sanatana dharma.

(op. cit.: 376)

Arabindo adopted and elaborated the Hindu nationalism of Bankim's writings. The coalescence of Vedanta and Indian nationalism was a rather new development in Arabindo's religio-political thinking. Arabindo used his journal *Karmayogin* as a platform for propagating his mixture of new Hinduism and Indian nationalism. As we have shown earlier, Arabindo in 1894 had devoted some articles to Bankim. In the *Karmayogin* Arabindo returned to Bankim by publishing a serialised translation of *Anandamath*.<sup>35</sup>

In the *Karmayogin* of 19 June 1909, Arabindo writes about Indian spirituality as the basis of Indian nationalism. He pleads for an appreciation of the 'Vedanta and Sufism, the temple or the mosque' and many different religious teachers of the Indian past as 'national asset[s]' (op. cit.: 379). Arabindo was sure about the basis of *sanatana dharma*: the spirituality of the Vedanta. But whatever could coexist with this Vedanta, like Sufism, would be equally regarded as part of *sanatana dharma* and would be a foundation of new Indian nationalism (cf. also op. cit.: 385). That this nationalism should be religious, Arabindo regards as a distinct advantage over European culture. In secularised Europe, Arabindo argues, religion 'is coming back in socialism, in the Anarchism of Bakunin and Tolstoy, in many other *isms*' (op. cit.: 380). Also in other articles published in the *Karmayogin* Arabindo reiterates his view that internalised *sanatana dharma* comprising 'Veda, Vedanta, Gita' and 'Bible or the Koran' (op. cit.: 385) is a 'law of life', a 'wider Hinduism' which is the 'spirit of the Nationalism which we profess and follow' (op. cit.: 385). In a way Arabindo conceals the thoroughly Western Protestant origins of nationalism. But as European nationalism is a secularised outflow of the Protestant ethic of hope for individual salvation and work for social improvement, Arabindo's nationalism is still the fully religious ethic of individual salvation and hope for Indian community-building and nation-building. He exclaims that we 'shall review European civilisation entirely from the standpoint of Indian thought' and 'throw off' the 'dominating stamp of the Occident' (op. cit.: 386). Whatever has to be adopted from the West, 'we shall take as Indians' (op. cit.: 386). Nationalism, which is a thoroughly Protestant concept derived from the book of Exodus, will be Indianised. And yet, it may not shed its European colours that easily. The concept of a nation-state as the bearer of modernity, is Western in origin. But it was possible for Arabindo – as for the nineteenth-century Hindu modernisers – to derive the ethic of this Western modernity

from indigenous Hindu texts and institutions like world-renunciation. In this sense, Arabindo borrowed from the West as an Indian.

Regarding Islam Arabindo did not show any hostility. In June 1909 he viewed the relationship between Hindus and Muslims as ‘a national problem’ of ‘supreme importance’ (op. cit.: 390). He maintained that it would be the work of his *Karmayogin*

to place Mahomed and Islam in a new light before our readers, to spread juster views of Mahomedan history and civilisation, to appreciate the Musulman’s place in our national development and the means of harmonising his communal life with our own.

(op. cit.: 390)

Arabindo wrote this in connection with the demands for a separate electorate for Indian Muslims and the Muslim League, founded on 30 December 1906 at Dacca in East Bengal.<sup>36</sup> The Hindu-Muslim question was going to take a more grim turn in the decades that followed. In this early phase fierce communal hostility on a national scale was not yet much in evidence. From the perspective of Hindu modernity, Arabindo was its most able propagator; not only had he made a synthesis of what had been thought and written in the nineteenth century, he had become the most famous and notorious spokesman for Hindu modernity and uncompromising anti-colonial nationalism. He had worked towards nationalist revolution both through direct personal influence and through his many writings in the nationalist press. After his exile to French India, Pondicherry in April 1910, Arabindo did not engage anymore in covert revolutionary action. He devoted most of his time to yoga and writing extensively on yoga, the Gita, the Upanishads, Hinduism, Indian culture and general history, political philosophy and sociology. The enormous body of his writings – all in English! – constitutes a sophisticated body of literature on modern Hinduism. But Arabindo’s lasting influence on Hindu nationalism falls clearly in the earlier phase of his life, roughly between 1900 and 1910 when he posed a real threat to the British Empire in India. With Arabindo the military trend of modern Hinduism had stepped into the lime-light of history. This trend was not aggressively Hindu exclusivist, for it did seem to genuinely try and include the Muslims in the nationalist fold, yet it was exclusivist in the sense that it extolled modern Hindu identity and vehemently rejected Western influences. In any case, Hindu revolutionary nationalism had come to stay. The ambiguous nature of modernity left a surprise: the inclusive and humanistic Brahmo Hinduism of Rabindranath Tagore.

## Notes

- 1 For a detailed description of the ceremony by which Tota Puri initiated Sri Ramakrishna into *sannyasa* and into Advaita Vedanta one should consult *Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master*, part II, chapt. XV, par. 11–18. This work is an

English translation made by Swami Jagadananda, of the Bengali biography of Sri Ramakrishna *Śrī Śrī Rāmakṛṣṇa-Līlāprasaṅga* by Swami Saradananda. Both Swamis were direct disciples of Sri Ramakrishna. The English *Sri Ramakrishna The Great Master* is published by the Sri Ramakrishna Math in Madras, the *Līlāprasaṅga* is published in Calcutta by the Udbodhan Karyalay, a Ramakrishna Mission publishing house. All the recent editions of these works bear the same pagination.

- 2 *Tantra* involves many antinomian ritual practices. These are meant to manipulate the immanent divine forces of the cosmos. Put bluntly, in *tantra* the practitioner transcends the sacred social order by consciously transgressing against Brahminical purity, ritual and social customs.
- 3 These are technical terms denoting a state of meditative concentration in which all conceptualising has ceased.
- 4 The names of these sixteen disciples and their names as world-renouncers are found in Swami Nikhilananda (1953: 72).
- 5 Belur Math still houses the headquarters of the Ramakrishna Mission and the Ramakrishna Mission Order of Monks. All these places lie within a few miles' distance of Dakshineshvar in North Calcutta.
- 6 The well-known religious teacher Bijoy Krishna Goswami (1841–99) was initially a Brahmo but later turned to Vaishnavism and became a world-renouncer. Nowadays he is still known as a teacher of Vaishnavism.
- 7 This was noted by the Criminal Investigation Dept. (CID). See J. E. Armstrong's report (1917) on 'Revolutionary Organization' reprinted in Amiya K. Samanta. 1995. *Terrorism in Bengal: A Collection of Documents*, Vol. 2. Calcutta: Government of West Bengal, p. 357. Also J. C. Nixon ICS notes in his 'Account of the Revolutionary Organisations in Bengal' (1917) the fact that Vivekananda was being studied by the revolutionaries; see Samanta (p. 527).
- 8 Here Vivekananda is quoting from the New Testament, Matth. 6:24.
- 9 Vivekananda's first published books bore these titles and contained lectures centred around these four themes: i.e. a small booklet called Karma-Yoga, a small booklet called Bhakti-Yoga, a rather large book called Jnana-Yoga and a translation with comments of Patanjali's Yoga-Sutras, under the title Raja-Yoga. All four are still in print.
- 10 For more details about this Parliament of religions, cf. Chaudhury-Sengupta (1998).
- 11 The fifth to sixth century CE Gaudapādīya-Kārikā, III: 17–18 states the principle of no discussion and no conflict of Advaita with other philosophical views in the following way:

The dualists are firmly attached to their own conclusions and contend with one another, but this (our view [of *advaita*, *abheda*]) does not conflict with them. The supreme reality is non-duality, and duality is said to be a separate part of it, while according to them (i.e. the dualists) there is duality in both ways [i.e. as non-duality and a part of non-duality]. Therefore this [non-duality] does not conflict [with anything].

It should be remembered that the Advaita doctrine is a typically inner world-renunciation ideology which was taught by some Brahmos and Vivekananda alike.

- 12 The idea that a single divine Self is present in every living thing, is made into the cornerstone of a modern Hindu ethics based on Advaita Vedanta. See for a recent statement of normative Advaita-theology of universalist ethics Rambachan (2015).
- 13 For details on Derozio's life cf. Edwards (1884).
- 14 Reward.

- 15 The text of this lecture is preserved in the India Office Library. Date of publication is given as March 1865, printed in Calcutta. The name of the author is not mentioned on the title page.
- 16 The 'Family' of organisations around the *Rashtriya Swayamsewak Sangh*, 'community of national volunteers', a Hindu extreme rightist group founded in 1925.
- 17 The Ramakrishna Mission published two booklets with selected passages from Vivekananda's Complete Works to show that he was a socialist. These two booklets bear the titles *Proletariat! Win Equal Rights* and *State, Society and Socialism*. Both are published by the Advaita Ashrama in Calcutta. Vivekananda's younger brother Bhupendranath Datta (1880–1961) actually was a militant freedom-fighter and a Marxist.
- 18 It is not always clear whether Vivekananda is referring to caste, *jāti*, of which there are many; or to *varṇa*, class, of which there are four. It is most likely he always had the latter in mind, like other Hindu thinkers of his time who thought *varṇa* was okay, but *jāti* was bad. A good example is Mahatma Gandhi who always defended the ideal-typical system of four *varṇas*, probably because all authoritative Sanskrit texts refer to them, including Buddhist source-texts.
- 19 See Chapter 5.
- 20 See Chapter 4, the section on Keshub.
- 21 These were the terms in use in the first years of the twentieth century.
- 22 The eldest son of Dr. Ghose was Benoybhusan, the second was Manmohan, after Arabindo came a sister, Sarojini, and the youngest son was Barindra Kumar (or short Barin). The latter would play an important part in the preparation of terrorist assaults on British officials. Until Arabindo retreated to Pondicherry in 1910 he was mostly known and referred to – in among others British CID reports – as Arabindo, the revolutionary. After 1910 he became known as Sri Aurobindo, the yogi and author of many mystical writings. In this part of the chapter I refer to him as Arabindo, not Sri Aurobindo.
- 23 Biographical details can be found in Purani (1995, chapter II), Heehs (1989, chapter 2) and Gordon (1974: 102–7).
- 24 Charles Stewart Parnell (1846–91), Irish nationalist politician.
- 25 This surely is a remarkable reverse in meaning and intent of Edward Said's 'orientalism' introduced in 1978 and which caused such a stir in American and European intellectual circles in the 1980s and 1990s of the twentieth century.
- 26 One could consult Sri Aurobindo, *Collected Poems*: 1–34, 173–335 for an impression of his themes in this period.
- 27 Bhawani is another name of Parvati, the wife of the God Shiva. But it can also refer to the Goddess Durga. Bhawani was also the form of the Goddess that was worshipped by the Maratha general Shivaji (1630–80); cf. Heehs (1993: 66).
- 28 In the *Bhawani Mandir* Arabindo refers to an episode of the Devimahatmya. Moreover, the theology of the Devimahatmya which claims that the Goddess encompasses the whole cosmos and *is* also the cosmos, is alluded to in Arabindo's pamphlet. It is a doctrine he had continued to hold.
- 29 Gordon dismisses the pamphlet as not being a serious product. In his view it may have been 'a façade for very different aims' but he fails to specify these hidden aims, nor does he indicate why such aims could be read into it (1974: 112). He devotes three pages to its content, which surely shows that he takes it seriously (op. cit.: 112–14).
- 30 By 1900 the total Indian population was estimated at three hundred million. See H. H. Risley and E. A. Gait. 1903. *Census of India, 1901. Volume I, Part I – Report*. Calcutta: Office of the Superintendent of Govt. Printing, India, p. 248.
- 31 The same word as in *ananda-math*.

- 32 The relevant passage of the Declaration is: 'it is the Right of the People to . . . institute new Government, laying its foundation on such principles and organizing its powers in such form, as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness.'
- 33 For details see Chapter 5.
- 34 For many details relating to this case, see Heehs (1993).
- 35 This translation up to chapter 14 of part one is reprinted in vol. 8 of the Birth Centenary Library of Sri Aurobindo's writings, pp. 317–56. Barin completed the translation and it was published as a book (*Anandamath* translated by Sri Aurobindo).
- 36 For details about the foundation of the All-India Muslim League consult: Sharif Al Mujahid (1990: 154–256).

## 7 Rabindranath Tagore

### The reluctant Hindu nationalist

#### Budding poet and writer

Rabindranath Tagore (1861–1941) was the 14th child of Debendranath and Sarada Devi. As Rabindranath's biographer Krishna Kripalani remarked: 'When the child was born the event, however, seemed of little significance' (Kripalani 1980: 33). His stature as the most important member of the Tagore clan came only after he received the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. Then he rose to world fame. But long before that event, in the days when Bankim was still alive and considered to be the most important Bengali writer, Rabindranath was gradually but steadily gaining recognition as the new poet of Bengal. Rabindranath brings us back to Brahmoism. It is tempting to regard him as the fourth and last prophet of Brahmoism. He unfolds his views on religion in a large number of essays written in various periods of his life, and in the many songs he composed for the Brahmo services. A good number of these songs have found their way into the hymnals of both the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj and the Keshubite Brahmo Samaj.<sup>1</sup>

Around the turn of the century a transition took place from theoretical Hindu modernity to organised practice. This transition was pushed forward by Swami Vivekananda and Aurobindo Ghose who were near contemporaries. Aurobindo travelled along the path of Bankim into the realm of revolutionary nationalism; Vivekananda propagated Advaita Vedanta as the Indian national religion. Both stressed the collective national aspect of Hindu modernity. By contrast Rabindranath – who was also their contemporary – stayed in the mild liberal individualist tradition of the Brahmo Samaj of his father. He started out entertaining ideas of the Indian nation and its goals along the lines of Vedantic Hinduism but ended up advocating liberal religious individualism inspired mainly by the Upanishads. This is not to say that Rabindranath was only a Hindu religious thinker. He was a versatile genius, enriching Bengali (and English) literature with all manner of genres ranging from the sonnet to experimental dance dramas; he was a painter and a musician. All this is well known. And yet his contributions to Indian religious thought have not attracted the attention they deserve.<sup>2</sup>

Rabindranath was raised in Brahmoism by his father. Debendranath took his 12-year-old son with him to the Himalayas. There, among splendid vistas of the highest peaks of the Himalaya range, father and son lived for a couple of months. In such surroundings Debendranath taught the young Rabindranath Sanskrit, some astronomy and read English books with him. He also taught him the verses from the Upanishads, in all likelihood the ones from the *Brahmo Dharma* (cf. P. K. Pal, *Ravijīvanī*, Vol. 1: 199). The holiday, and the intimate and friendly relationship with his father who was known as the Maharshi (great seer), left an indelible impression upon Rabindranath's mind. Before those days in the mountains Rabindranath had hardly had any real contact with his father, but now as it were, he had his father all to himself.

From then onwards Rabindranath's poetic talent which had laid hidden, began to show itself. The young poet composed work after work exclusively in his native Bengali: poetic tales, *Kavi-kāhinī* 'Story of the Poet' (1878), and *Vana-phul* 'Forest Flower' (1880); dance dramas such as *Vālmiki-pratibhā* 'The Genius of Valmiki' (1881) and *Kāl-mṛgayā* 'Fateful Hunt' (1882); lengthy poems such as *Bhagna-hṛdaya* 'Broken Heart' (1881), and a volume of poetry which gave him some fame, *Sandhyā-saṅgīt* 'Evening-songs' (1882).<sup>3</sup> Later he regarded these works as immature attempts. In spite of his own low opinion of these early works, they do show a great command of the Bengali language.

About his religious opinions of those early days we do not know much beyond what he himself has cared to say about them. Describing his early years he writes in his English essays published in 1931 as *The Religion of Man*:

I was born in a family which, at that time, was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based upon the philosophy of the Upanishad. Somehow my mind at first remained coldly aloof, absolutely uninfluenced by any religion whatever. It was through an idiosyncrasy of my temperament that I refused to accept religious teaching merely because people in my surroundings believed it to be true. . . . Thus my mind was brought up in an atmosphere of freedom – freedom from the dominance of any creed that had its sanction in the definite authority of some scripture, or in the teaching of some organized body of worshippers. . . . When I look back upon those days, it seems to me that unconsciously I followed the path of my Vedic ancestors, and was inspired by the tropical sky with its suggestion of an uttermost Beyond.

(The English Writings, Vol. 3: 120–1)

In this freedom of spirit came to Rabindranath what he called a 'sudden spring breeze of religious experience' (op. cit. 1931: 93, 1993: 58). The description of this experience given in 'The Religion of Man' is brief and not as informative as the one found in his Bengali autobiography, *Jīvan-smṛti*



'Life's Memories' originally published in 1912. As to the nature of this religious experience, from the various descriptions Rabindranath has given of it, it seems in a way similar to his father's revelation of the *Brahmo Dharma*.<sup>4</sup> Although Rabindranath never acted the role of a religious teacher, he took religious experience quite seriously. This seems perfectly in line with the general tendency of Hindu spirituality, namely that it derives from personal private experience, which is what is ideally also realised in the sphere of world-renunciation. In Rabindranath's case this was inner world-renunciation. His own testimony of this experience shows that it could be regarded as a kind of calling. This came to him in 1883. There seem to have been several experiences with varying intensity. The first one happened as he was walking on the roof terrace of the ancestral house in Jorasanko, North Calcutta. In his Bengali autobiography *Jīvan-smṛti* Rabindranath describes the scene.<sup>5</sup> It was evening:

The evening . . . that was drawing near and whose light of the setting sun mixed with the gloominess of the end of day, revealed itself to me as particularly charming. Even the walls of the neighbouring house struck me as beautiful. I began to wonder whether it was merely the magic of the twilight illumination that had fully pulled away the covering of banality from before the world as I knew it. That was not at all the case. I could see very well the true cause of this: the evening had entered into me and this little 'me' had been covered up. When in the full daylight this small 'me' comes most harshly to the fore, then I cover up everything I am seeing and hearing, enveloping it with this 'me'. But, because now this same 'me' had receded into the background, I was seeing the living world (*jagat*) in its own form (*svarūp*). This form is by no means banal – it consists in joy, it is full of beauty. Later on I tried sometimes to consciously push back my own self and as a mere witness to see the world, then my heart would feel happiness.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 9: 491–2)

This experience, although tending towards the mystical, could as well have been purely aesthetic. In fact, in Tagore's later works, the mystical vision of the world and the aesthetic experience of the world are often merging, thus lending an indeterminate religious flavour to many of his works, especially his lyrical poetry. But the experience is also interesting from the point of view of world-renunciation. Rabindranath is experimenting with psychological world-renunciation; formal renunciation he never advocated and even abhorred as unsocial. He leaves his worldly self behind and tries to see the world as it really is.

A later experience far exceeded this one in duration and intensity. This happened in Sudder Street, at the house of Rabindranath's elder brother

Jyotirindranath. In *Jīvan-smṛti* Rabindranath gives the following description. It was morning:

I know that where the road of Sudder Street ends, the trees in the garden of the Free School are visible. One day, at dawn, I stood on the veranda and was looking in that direction. The sun was just rising from behind the screen of the leaves on the trees there. As I was watching, it suddenly seemed as if immediately a curtain was pulled up before my eyes. I saw the whole world (*saṃsār*) fully enveloped in an incomparable (*aparūp*) majesty, everywhere vibrating with joy (*ānanda*) and beauty (*saundarya*). The covering of melancholy which pressed in layer upon layer on my heart, was pierced within a brief moment, and the light of the world fell on my inner being, fully irradiating it. That day the poem *Nirjharer Svapnabhaṅga* (The Awakening of the Waterfall) gushed forth and flowed onwards. The writing of it ended, but even then the curtain did not drop before this form of joy (*ānandarūpa*) of the living world (*jagat*).

(op. cit.: 492)

Twice he compares the experience and the consequent vision of the world, to the lifting of a curtain, something which happens suddenly and unexpectedly and without the conscious aid of the spectator. Joy, *ānanda*, and beauty, *saundarya*, are the two keynotes of his experience. The whole world seems filled with them, the whole world vibrates with life and light. It was light, after all, which had seemingly brought about both experiences. The poetry written in this state he therefore aptly collects in a volume called *Prabhāt Saṅgīt* 'Morning Songs', as the morning of enlightenment and meaning followed upon the previous evening of self-centredness and melancholy. The second long poem in this volume – allegedly written in this heightened state of consciousness – captures the ecstatic mood of this state. A few samples may illustrate this:

Why did a ray of sunlight that lost its way,  
not finding its home,  
why did it suddenly shine upon my heart  
this morning!  
After many days a single ray  
appeared in the cave,  
on the dark waters inside me  
a streak of gold has shone.  
I cannot suppress the passion in my heart,  
now the waters heave and surge,  
billowing restlessly, while  
a softly murmuring melody has begun.  
I do not know why this morning  
my heart has awakened!

Being awake I see around me  
the gloomy prison made of stone,  
the darkness lying in my heart  
is brooding on itself.  
I do not know why, after so many days,  
my heart has awakened!

...

Why did I today all of a sudden see  
the face of the world in a new way?  
As if a fragment of one bird's song  
sung the song of the world!  
Today I have a mind to go out  
in order to see the world,  
I will no longer watch my own dreams,  
sitting in a corner of my cave.  
I will pour out a stream of benevolence,  
I will break the prison of stone,  
I will roam around, singing and flooding  
the world like a restless madman;  
with loose hair, gathering flowers,  
ascending on my wings marked by rainbows,  
scattering laughs in the sunlight,  
I will pour out my heart.  
I will hurry from peak to peak,  
I will roll from mountain to mountain,  
laughing loudly, singing sweetly,  
I will beat the rhythms with my hands.  
Having become a river, I will flow -  
I will smoothly move on, ever saying  
the things of my heart,  
I will always sing my songs;  
as long as I'll give my heart, my heart will flow on,  
it will not come to an end.

...

How is there so much gladness, so much beauty,  
so much playfulness!  
Who can say towards whom I will drift  
in the swiftness of youth!  
With unbounded longing, infinite hope,  
I wish to see the world!  
The desire is aroused, I am flowing on  
flooding all beings and all things.  
I can pour out all my heart,  
I can endure all times,

I can submerge all lands,  
then what else do I desire!  
This is the longing of my heart.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 1: 51–4)

In this long hymnic poem Rabindranath gives testimony to his new-found source of poetic inspiration. The remarkable state of consciousness that came over him on that morning opened up his heart. He wishes to pour out his heart in music in order to make known to the world his ability to reflect the beauty and the joy of the world in its true aspect. Rabindranath does not speak about God in this, as if initially avoiding sticking labels. He described the fact of these experiences as awakening: ‘my heart has awakened!’. This indicates the spontaneous occurrence of these experiences. They happen within his own consciousness but are brought by the world in its true form. The intensity with which he avows that the true face of the world radiates joy and beauty is reminiscent of the Upanishadic sayings in the ‘communion’ with God. This part of the Brahmo liturgy for the prayer service is called *samādhān*. It consists of the following sentences in Sanskrit: *satyam jñānam anantam brahma* (Taitt. Up. 2.1); *ānandarūpam amṛtam yad vibhāti* (Mundaka Up. 2.2.7); *śāntam śivam advaitam* (Mandukya 7): ‘Brahman is truth, knowledge [or: consciousness] and endless[ness], which, *possessing the form of joy*, shines forth as immortality; [Brahman] is peaceful, benign and without duality’.<sup>6</sup> In Rabindranath’s own spiritual development, the thoughts about God, or a supreme spirit pervading the universe, came later. But he seems to refer quite explicitly to the Upanishadic sentences of the *Brahmo Dharma* prayer service, the *brahmopāsanā*, to describe his ‘calling’. He regarded the ‘Morning Songs’ as his first mature poetic work and the map along which his later poetic work would travel:

I see now that with the first poem of the ‘Morning Songs’, ‘The Awakening of the Waterfall’, I had drawn an allegorical map of the path along which my heart was to journey.

...

On the day of this single unprecedented extraordinary unfolding of my heart I had written ‘The Awakening of the Waterfall’, but who would have realized that with this same poem the preface to my entire poetry had been written?

(unpublished parts of *Jīvan-smṛti*, source Sen 1973: 81–2)

Like his father, Rabindranath practised some form of inner renunciation. Moreover, like his father he was ‘called’, not to become a religious leader but to become a (religious) poet.

### Private personal Hinduism: Jīvandeavatā, personal God<sup>7</sup>

The first full blossoming of Rabindranath’s poetical powers occurred after the writing of ‘Morning Songs’. It was followed by *Mānasī* ‘Imagined

Woman’/‘Woman Made of Mindstuff’ (1890); *Sonār Tarī* ‘The Golden Boat’ (1894); and the most well-known volume, *Citrā* ‘Lady of Many Forms’ (1896). In the latter volume there are long, meditative poems which seem to be addressed to the Godhead but at the same time to a female divine person: *Antaryāmī*, ‘The Inner Ruler’,<sup>8</sup> and *Sāadhanā*, ‘Worship’. In these poems a beloved woman, Goddess, even mother-Goddess, and the ultimate divinity, all seem to blend into one person, one divine power that is invoked under such different guises. The most well-known of these meditative poems, and the one after whose title a particular theme in Rabindranath’s poetical development is named, is *Jivandevatā*, ‘The God of My Life’. In this poem the ‘God’ or divinity is distinctly addressed as male.

*Jivandevatā*  
*The God of My Life*

O Innermost one,  
 have you fully satisfied your thirst,  
 who are in my inner being?  
 Filling this cup with endless streams  
 of pain and happiness, I gave it to you;  
 with merciless torment I wrung my heart,  
 like a pressed grape.  
 Out of many colours and fragrances,  
 many melodies and rhythms,  
 which I steadily knitted together, I made  
 the bridal bed for you.  
 Steadily melting the gold of my desires,  
 I have fashioned day by day  
 for your momentary pastimes  
 ever new images.

You yourself had chosen me,  
 I do not know what you expected.  
 Residing in your deserted place,  
 did you enjoy, Lord of my life,  
 my nights, my mornings,  
 my playing, my deeds?  
 In the rainy season, in autumn, in spring, in winter,  
 my heart has echoed with so much music;  
 did you hear it, sitting lonely  
 on your lion-throne?  
 The blossoms of my mind, did you pluck them,  
 did you make a garland and wear it round your neck;  
 lost in thought, did you wander  
 in the forest of my youth?

What are you gazing at, o friend,  
with your eyes fixed on my heart?  
Have you forgiven me, whenever I  
erred, fell, and made mistakes?  
How many days have passed without adoring you,  
how many nights without my serving you, O Lord –  
flowers for worship blossoming in a desolate wood  
drooped and fell down.  
You tuned the strings of this vina<sup>9</sup> for your melodies,  
but the high pitch the strings cannot endure, –  
O Poet, am I able to sing  
the tunes that you created?  
I entered your garden to water it,  
but I lay down in the shade and fell asleep –  
in the evening I brought home  
the tears of my eyes.

O Master of my life, is everything spent,  
from whatever I possessed  
of beauty, of song, of life,  
of waking and dull sleep?  
The embrace has loosened,  
my kisses lack intoxicating wine –  
Has the night of the tryst in the grove of my life  
now turned to dawn?  
Then break up this gathering of today,  
bring new forms, bring new beauty,  
make me new once more,  
who am everlasting and ancient –  
You will bind me with a new life-thread  
to a new marriage.  
29 magh 1302, 11 Feb 1896

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 195–6)

This poem and its main theme have always aroused controversy as to the intentions behind it, and what the God of Life really meant.<sup>10</sup> The richness of the imagery in this poem admits of many interpretations. The definite meaning, the final interpretation to end all further interpretations, does not exist. A few things seem to be beyond doubt: Rabindranath addresses his own God in this poem, a God who steers the poet's life-course. This God is there for the poet as an everlasting companion and as the poet's creator who is awaiting the fruits of his own creation. The poet regards himself as a musical instrument in the hands of this personal God who invites the poet to be ready for the divine touch.

The poem and its concept are emblematic for Rabindranath's individualist idea of religion: not fixed in formulas, not definable, but an object of

intuitions and aesthetic pleasure rather than of books and doctrines. Still, Rabindranath has given an interpretation of the *Jīvandevatā*-concept which inspired this particular poem. In the first chapter (written sometime in 1904) of his self-revelatory notes in Bengali published under the title *Ātmaparicay*, he says:

When I, an insignificant person, was becoming restless to say some insignificant words, then there was One who enthusiastically told me, 'come on, say your words! All are looking on with open mouth, waiting for these words'. With these words He would look at the audience and give a wink. With affection and in fun He would smile a bit and say all His own words from within my words.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 14: 138)

The *Jīvandevatā* (who in the relevant poems themselves is often also addressed as a Goddess) is the one who looks at the poet and speaks His words through the poet's words. The human poet Rabindranath calls himself the mouthpiece of the Godhead. The God of his life is the source of inspiration of the poetry that the poet composes. In the same essay Rabindranath continues about the God of his life:

To this Poet, who has continued to create my life with every good and bad thing, with every agreeable and disagreeable element, to Him I gave in my poetry the name 'God of my Life' (*Jīvandevatā*). Not that I think that He has only unified all the fragments of my present life on earth, and harmonised it with the world. I know that since time immemorial He has brought me to my present manifestation, through multifarious, now forgotten, states of being. Through His support the great memory of this stream of existence that is flowing through the world, lies hidden within me. For this reason am I able to experience such an ancient oneness with trees and creepers, with beasts and birds; for this reason do I not feel this huge, mysterious, and colossal world to be alien and frightening.

(op. cit.: 139–40)

Rabindranath continues with an interesting view on different schools of thought in Vedānta. He displays his knowledge of Hindu theological thought:

I do not claim to possess spiritual knowledge (*tattvavidyā*). If an argument arises about dualism (*dvaita-vāḍ*) or monism (*advaita-vāḍ*), I have no answer. I am only speaking on the basis of my experience; within myself rests the joy (*ānanda*) of this bit of manifestation of my inner God (*antar-devatā*) – it is this joy, this love, which overwhelms all my limbs, my intelligence and my mind (*buddhi-man*), this visible world

around me, my beginningless past and endless future. In no way do I understand this pastime, but within myself there is always this one pastime of love.

(op. cit.: 141)

Rabindranath is first referring to age-old debates in Indian theology and philosophy. The question is this: does one single divine principle alone exist and is all plurality illusion? In (distorting) brevity this represents the teaching of monism, *advaita-vāda*. Or is there a plurality of (indestructible) individual souls along with a supreme God? This is the doctrine of pluralism or dualism, *dvaita-vāda*. Advaita's most famous proponents in India were Gaudapada (probably fifteenth century AD) with his Agamashastra, and Shankara (eighth century AD) who wrote commentaries on the classical Upanishads, the Gita, and the Brahma Sutra, and who is the author also of independent treatises on Advaita. The most outspoken proponent of pluralism, Dvaita, was Madhva (thirteenth century AD). The oldest form of *dvaita-vāda* is the ancient Sankhya philosophy as found in the Mahabharata. As we have seen in the third chapter, Rammohun represented the Advaita view in Brahmoism. In the fourth chapter we have seen how Debendranath advocated the dvaita view. But these theological issues are not important to Rabindranath. What counts are not doctrines, but the love and joy of the Godhead who permeates Rabindranath's inner and outer world. Rabindranath writes here in a manner similar to his father. The mentality that emerges from this passage is that of the private single inner renouncer who is satisfied with God's love and the love for God. This is the theological stance of many adherents of the *bhakti*-movement. However, direct experience counts for much more than theological debate. In this Rabindranath does not deviate from – for example – Sri Ramakrishna who trusted his direct experience of the divine more than scriptural teachings. This is state of the total renouncer: the scriptures function as beacons, but they do not express the real full truth. Only direct experience of God or the divine or awakening is a valid source of religious belief. Rabindranath uses this Indian religious idiom while giving it an aesthetic twist. He exclaims to feel the joy of God's manifestation within himself. He seems to allude to the poetic religious awakening he had in Sunder Street where beauty and joy were the keynotes.

In 1912 he wrote a letter in Bengali to Mohitchandra Sen, explaining some of his views regarding the God of his life:

Deep within me lies hidden one great, very ancient 'Me' – he is, in a special form, the God of my life – through his profound and mysterious appearance, my 'Me' is in a special way the self of the Godhead (*devatātmā*). He has his abode beyond this world, but he is setting me in motion in this world; daily he is trying to gain his meaningfulness by rendering me meaningful among joys and sufferings, under favourable and adverse circumstances. Residing within me he is sometimes



unsuccessful, sometimes he is successful, but never does he abandon me for even one moment. Through him I have my connection with God (*īśvara*). He is trying to convey and accumulate within me God's (*īśvara*) messages, commands and joys; moreover, every day he is working to burn my sins and to glorify my merits; by forming me thus he will gain his own perfection. His power leads me towards the good (*maṅgal*), and my acquiring of the good (*maṅgal*) increases his strength. Like a mistress of the house residing in the inner chambers behind the screen of my outer consciousness, he incessantly takes in and out things from his hidden treasury. If we can fulfil each other by being connected through the joy of love, only then will I be able to understand within myself the eternal loving bond between this world (*jagat*) and the world beyond (*atijagat*); then in no situation whatsoever will God remain concealed from us.

(*Thākur*, *Citrā*: 163–4)

Trying to assess Rabindranath's concept of the God of his life, may lead to the kind of schoolmaster pedantry Tagore himself so much abhorred. For, after all, we are confronted with a poetical concept, a poetical declaration of faith based on personal intuitions, not a doctrinaire theology or scholastic metaphysics. That is why he asserts that he does not 'possess spiritual knowledge'. All 'scholastic' analysis of this concept of the inner God will shut out the aspect of personal inspiration from before the eyes of the reader or the analysing scholarly interpreter.

And yet Rabindranath felt a need to describe a presence within his own inner being, of a divinity ruling over the movements of his life. This he calls the Godhead of his life. This God of his life is a sort of personal mediator. This personal God binds the poet to the great cosmic God of the universe. The personal God inspires the poet's present life with the urge to create poetry – Rabindranath suggests that the *Jīvandevatā* actually speaks through his words – but who also oversaw the poet's very evolution from speck of dust to present-day human manifestation. The God of his life is Rabindranath's very personal and intimate version of the great God of the universe. The religion that Rabindranath experiences for himself consists in a creative relationship with this personal private God, who – in a way – is the poet himself, a private God transcending and at the same time informing the personality of Rabindranath the poet. This creative private relationship constitutes Rabindranath's very own individualistic religion. At the same time this most private religion is inseparable from the modern Hindu tradition of Brahmoism that gave cultural shape to his private religion. The privateness of this cult of the God of his life transcends the limitations of pure solipsism as Rabindranath's published and therefore public poetry is determined by it. The God of his life has two faces, two manifestations: a private individualistic one and a public universal one. Both faces derive from the world-renouncing tendencies of Upanishadic theology. The

Upanishads moulded Rabindranath's religious thought very fundamentally, both through the Brahmo Samaj and Rabindranath's personal liking for the Upanishads.

### The Upanishads and the Jīvandevatā

The teaching about the inner controller '*antaryāmin*' found in the Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad (BAU) 3.7 and Mandukya 6 played a formative role in Rabindranath's concept of the God of his life. For the Upanishadic *antaryāmin* is as much an inner ruler within every individual being as the inner ruler of cosmic powers such as fire, wind, the sun, etc. Although the relevant passages from this part of the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad and the Mandukya do not form part of Debendranath's Brahma Dharma, we must yet assume Rabindranath knew more about the Upanishads than from his father's selection alone. Three passages from the Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad (BAU) elucidate the point:

He who resides in the earth, who is different from the earth, whom the earth does not know, whose body is the earth, who – from within (yo . . . *antaro*) – rules (*yamayati*) the earth, this one is your Self (*ātmā*), the inner ruler (*antaryāmin*), the immortal one (*amṛtaḥ*).

(BAU 3.7.3)<sup>11</sup>

He who resides in all beings, who is different from all beings, whom all beings do not know, whose body is all beings, who – from within – rules all beings, this one is your Self (*ātmā*), the inner ruler (*antaryāmin*), the immortal one (*amṛtaḥ*).

(BAU 3.7.15)

He who resides in the [individual] consciousness (*viññāna*), who is different from consciousness, whom consciousness does not know, who – from within – rules consciousness, this one is your Self (*ātmā*), the inner ruler (*antaryāmin*), the immortal one (*amṛtaḥ*).

(BAU 3.7.22)

The only other old Upanishad in which the term *antaryāmin* is found is the Mandukya. This short Upanishad, alluding to BAU 3.7, says in text 6:

He is the Lord (*īśvara*) of all, He is the all-knowing one (*sarvajña*), He is the inner ruler (*antaryāmin*), He is the womb of the all, for He is the origin and the dissolution of [living] beings.

The idea found in these Upanishadic passages is similar to Rabindranath's *Jīvandevatā*. The Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad speaks about a divine principle or spirit that rules from within, rules the individual consciousness of

man as well as the great cosmic powers such as the earth. According to the Mandukya He is even the Lord, is God himself, the source of creation as well as the cause of destruction or disappearance of living entities. It is interesting to note that in the Mandukya this 'Lord of All' is not the ultimate divine. This Lord is identified with the third part of the Self, the third part which represents the state of deep sleep or unconsciousness. In the Mandukya the ultimate transcendence is the fourth part of the Self. This fourth part is called *advaita* in Mandukya 7. *Advaita* means 'non-dual'. This non-dual fourth part is the real Self according to the Mandukya. Also Rabindranath does not call his *Jīvandeavatā* the ultimate God, the *Jīvandeavatā* acts as a mediator between Rabindranath's personal self as a poet, and the ultimate Lord. However, like his father, Rabindranath does not seem to share the monistic Advaita trend of thought found in the Mandukya. The supreme Lord for Rabindranath could be a divinity like the indwelling cosmic spirit of the BAU 3.7, but not a monistic supreme Self of the Mandukya, even though Rabindranath might sometimes call his Lord by names that sound 'advaitic'.<sup>12</sup>

### Antaryāmin as Goddess

The term *antaryāmin* is significant, for Rabindranath wrote a poem in September 1894, one and a half years before '*Jīvandeavatā*', which was called *Antaryāmī*, and in it he wished to 'try to clarify much about the facts of' his 'inner (*antara*) life (*jīvan*)'.<sup>13</sup> This poem, also in the volume *Citrā*, is much longer than '*Jīvandeavatā*'. Although it does not yet call the divinity by the name of 'God of my life', it lauds a divine figure that already resembles the idea of the *Jīvandeavatā*. But in his autobiographical first chapter of *Ātmaparicaya*, Rabindranath discusses *Antaryāmī* and indicates that it is a poem about the *Jīvandeavatā*. In *Antaryāmī* Rabindranath calls the God of his life a playful Lady, in other words, he seems to evoke the imagery of a Goddess. What is important here is Rabindranath's development towards the *Jīvandeavatā*. The term *antaryāmī* itself is taken from the Upanishads, and it does have a masculine gender issue, for the word in Sanskrit is masculine and as we saw from the quotations from the Brhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad earlier, the term refers to a male concept of Self (*ātman*), and Lord (*īśvara*) which is definitely masculine in Sanskrit. It seems Rabindranath is playing with the gender of the divinity, but gender is unimportant as a theological issue. It is, rather, a poetical issue, a matter of poetic imagery.<sup>14</sup>

#### *Antaryāmī* *The Inner Ruler*

Is this your eternally new playfulness  
O playful Lady!  
How did you make me say  
the things I wished to say?

Forever living in my heart,  
 you snatch my speech from my mouth,  
 with my words you speak your words  
 mixing them with your music.  
 What I wish to say, that I forget,  
 what you make me say, that will I say;  
 of the stream of music I find no other shore –  
 to what distant places will I drift away!  
 Here on the riverbank, I was saying  
 my own words to my own people,  
 by the door of my house I was telling  
 many household tales –  
 You have burned this speech with fire,  
 you have submerged it in a lake of tears,  
 with new skills you wrought new images  
 to your heart's liking.  
 What speech these magic forms are uttering!  
 From where did they acquire such feeling!  
 I am watching, filled with surprise,  
 absorbed in mystery.  
 Whence does this music arise,  
 whence this loveliness blossom,  
 how is this heart-rending  
 weeping now silenced!  
 As if blind the new rhythms  
 run away in greatest joy.  
 In them new agony breaks out in music  
 set to novel tunes.  
 Thoughts I did not think before, I utter now,  
 pains I did not know, I feel at present;  
 I do not know whose messages I bring,  
 nor to whom I must deliver them!  
 How will anyone understand their meaning,  
 someone says this, someone says that,  
 in vain they ask me every time,  
 you watch it and you laugh perhaps!  
 Who are you, and where do you hide,  
 I desperately search you!

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 158–9)

This poem written in 1895 from which I have quoted here only the first of five sections, colours the Upanishadic image of the Inner Controller with devotional imagery of a Goddess or divine Lady. The atmosphere in this poem is reminiscent of the Sudder Street experience. Also in *Nirjharer Svapnabhanga* 'Awakening of the Waterfall' the poet felt an opening up and

the gushing forth of music and poetic inspiration. The *Jīvandevatā* poems pick up this basic theme of the Sudder Street experience and fill it in with the images of God and Goddess. In *Antaryāmī* the Sudder Street experience is consolidated as the indwelling Goddess of Life. Like the God in the later poem *Jīvandevatā*, in the preceding poem *Antaryāmī* the Goddess makes the poet sing and speak. She gives the emotions to his poetry. The poet's creative gift is coming from Her. She sings her own songs through the poet. The image of an indwelling Goddess also occurs in another poem with the theme of an indwelling divinity of life: *Sāadhanā*, 'Worship'. Here the Goddess is explicitly invoked and asked to accept the worship of the poet, a worship which is inadequate compared to that of other, more learned and successful devotees of the Goddess, perhaps the votaries of the national Goddess invoked in *Vande Mataram*. The poem *Sāadhanā* also forms part of the volume *Citrā*. This poem was written in 1894: it precedes *Antaryāmī* and *Jīvandevatā* by more than a year.

*Sāadhanā*  
Worship

Goddess, many devotees have come and laid  
many offerings at your feet;  
I, wretched and with tearful eyes, I brought  
this futile worship.  
You know the longing of my heart,  
the many wishes that were vain,  
yet I remained loyal to my intense desire,  
day and night.  
The plans I had in mind have changed;  
I made them only to abandon them again,  
they were mixed with good and bad,  
with light and darkness.  
Yet, Goddess, night and day with my life's blood  
I laid at your feet  
the wealth of my most noble wish,  
this futile worship.  
As they watch my futile worship,  
all your votaries who gained results,  
are laughing.  
Goddess, if for a single moment you would cast  
a side-glance full of tenderness,  
shed one tear, showing  
your benevolence,  
that will give the greatest meaning to  
this futile worship.

Goddess, numerous performers have arrived today  
to play their songs;  
I brought my pitiful little vina; it is silent, old,  
its strings have snapped.  
You know I was not careless,  
I did not idle on roads and fields,  
I always sat and practised  
incessantly.  
The half songs that came to me,  
the melodies I wanted to try out,  
all these the strings could not endure –  
they snapped.  
Thus I remain without a song, and I have brought  
this little instrument of my heart,  
the heart's wealth, this songless vina  
whose strings have snapped.  
All your worthy worshippers see  
my vina whose strings have snapped,  
and in contempt they ridicule.  
If you take it on your lap,  
all the unsung songs will inundate  
your ears, O Lady  
seated in my heart!  
The vina whose strings had snapped  
will declare its longing.

In this life, O Goddess, I sat down to sing so many songs,  
I have reaped many fruits –  
those I have given to the people of the world,  
I filled the earth.  
Let those who like them take them,  
let them stay as long as they like,  
honour and dishonour may all  
roll in the dust.  
The words I spoke – the works I did –  
are mine not anymore, they are for everyone,  
they roam around the world  
in different guises.  
All the finest assets I possess  
I laid before you –  
duties not done, words not said, songs unsung,  
heaps of fruitless desires.  
O, heaps of fruitless desires,  
today whoever sees this rubbish in my house  
laughs in contempt.

If you, Goddess, stretch out your hand –  
 and hold the wreath you strung,  
 you fill my days and nights with fragrance,  
 O ever new one!  
 you make fruitful my life's  
 heaps of fruitless desires.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 163–5)

As Rabindranath testified in the letter and in *Ātmaparicay* from both of which we quoted here, the God of his life makes him sing God's music and say God's words. In this poem however, the poet invokes the God of his life as a Goddess. This is hardly surprising and may be explained from the general interest in the cult of the Hindu Goddess Devi and her different manifestations, a general interest that rose to a high pitch towards the end of the nineteenth century. Keshub got interested in the Goddess figure (cf. Chapter 4); Sri Ramakrishna was a devotee of the Goddess Kali (cf. Chapter 6) and Durga figures prominently in Bankim's *Anandamath* (cf. Chapter 5). In the same vein Rabindranath uses the Goddess imagery. In these two poems from *Citrā* Rabindranath evokes the image of a Goddess, not to express national sentiments or a geographical entity like Bankim did, but to express his private feelings regarding the Supreme Being. The Hindu idiom in these two poems is explicit: only Hinduism knows a Goddess as the Supreme Being. In Christianity, Islam and Judaism the Supreme God is male: God the Father is the most well-known expression in Christianity. Islam and Judaism do not speak about the fatherhood of God, but God is certainly never described in terms of femininity, neither in the Quran, nor in the Jewish Torah, nor in the other texts of the Tanakh. If God is not a she, He must be a He.

The imagery of Rabindranath's two poems is unambiguously Hindu in tenor. But he is not an orthodox worshipper of the Mother Goddess.<sup>15</sup> He experiments with the conceptualisation of God as Goddess. With this imagery Rabindranath is close to the general Hindu trend of his days, and yet he stays aloof from the ritualistic and nationalist implications of the Goddess cult. Hence he portrays himself as an unsuccessful and pitiable worshipper of the Goddess. The other great 'worthy' worshippers he deems – but partly ironically – to be far superior to himself. He can only hope for the grace of the Goddess, whereas they are quite sure that they have won Her over, because they have so much to lay before Her feet as offerings. The poet himself has precious little to give, besides himself, his own body and soul which he compares to an old broken vina, the string-instrument he also mentions in his poem *Jīvandevatā*. The last stanza of 'Worship' is mildly suggestive of a mood of inner world-renunciation. The poet is offering whatever he said and sung to the world. He casts aside the 'heaps of fruitless desires' as 'rubbish'. He renounces the claims of his ego to the words and music which are coming from his mouth but actually are

inspired by his God of life. The Goddess is asked to lift up the useless heaps of desires and wear it as a garland around her neck. The poet has nothing else to offer the Goddess but his own failures.

### Public universalist Hinduism and the Hindu nation

From the foregoing we can conclude that some ten years after his religio-mystical experiences in Jorasanko and Sudder Street, Rabindranath wished to fashion a more personified imagery for what he came to regard as their source. The *Jīvandevatā* as a very personal, spiritual reality remained the guiding principle of most of his subsequent religious poetry (the most famous of which, roughly 15 years later, is the Bengali *Gītāñjali* 'Handful of Songs' from 1910)<sup>16</sup> and his religious/philosophical essays (*Dharma* 'Religion' 1909, *Saṅcay* 'Anthology' 1916) and his sermons for the Brahmo Samaj.<sup>17</sup> These essays constitute the first major harvest of Rabindranath's religious thought. Later this was followed by other major works. It is justified to regard this body of writings as a twentieth-century incarnation of Brahmo-inspired theological/philosophical thought, the kind of liberal religious thought that was begun by Raja Rammohun Roy and that moved along the path explored by Debendranath. But Rabindranath's thought moves further onwards, beyond the limitations of sectarian Brahmoism into a realm of universalism. Rabindranath tried to outgrow what he regarded as the limitations of both sectarian Brahmoism and increasingly militant Hindu anti-colonial nationalism. And he publicly gave vent to his opinions about what Hindu nationalism could be, should be and should not be.

Rabindranath's familiarity with the cultural politics of Hindu nationalism dated back from his teens, when he composed a song for the Hindu Mela (a large Hindu festival) held in Calcutta in 1875 (cf. Pal, *Ravijīvanī*, Vol. 1: 233–4). Deeper interest grew only with the years. Around the turn of the century the nation forms a dominant theme in his poetry and essays. Rabindranath, like Bankim, constructs the nation in two ways: he invokes the nation aesthetically through poetical forms or novels; and describes, exhorts and theorises the nation through discursive prose, mostly essays and meditations. Rabindranath wrote many songs celebrating the motherland, Bengal or India.<sup>18</sup> His well-known volume of Bengali poems *Naibedya* (first published in 1901) contains some sonnets lamenting the weakness of the nation in his days. A good example is poem 60 of *Naibedya*, written in the form of a sonnet:

Once in a forest of India, someone proclaimed  
in the greatness of his heart, with joyful strength:  
'hark, people of the world, hark sons of the Immortal,  
gods who dwell in the high heavens;  
I know Him, the Great Spirit,  
the Radiant One beyond the darkness.



Death can be overcome, if you but  
know Him, see Him; there is no other path'.

Who will bring to India once more  
this great spell of joy, this life-giving  
high message, who will give to heaven and to earth  
this supreme word that conquers death, this word  
fearless, endless, deathless.

O dead India,  
there is only this, there is no other path.  
(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 4: 294)

The message that was proclaimed from the ancient Indian forests to which the poem refers is taken from the *Brahmo Dharma*, texts 151, 152, corresponding to Shvetashvatara Upanishad 2: 5 and 3: 8.

Let all the sons of the Immortal listen, who ascended to the heavenly abodes (Svet 2: 5). I know this great Spirit, Who has the colour of the sun, Who is beyond darkness. By knowledge of Him alone does one overcome death. There is no other path to go (Svet 3: 8).

Obviously the poet hopes that modern India will listen once more to this Upanishadic message, which is a message of hope and self-regeneration. Nowadays India is 'dead', but by imbibing this message of India's ancient seers, she may wake up once more. There is even a hint of India's messianic role in the world as this message gives the 'supreme word that conquers death' to 'heaven and to earth'. Written in 1900 this sonnet breathes a spirit similar to that of the exhortatory language of Vivekananda and of Arabindo in 1904–5. Rabindranath, however, did not use the optimistic rhetoric that Vivekananda uttered about India and the world at large. Rabindranath was not optimistic about nationalistic cant. Around the turn of the century the world had already witnessed several wars in which Western powers played a major aggressive role: the second Boer war; the Philippine-American war to suppress the Philippine independence movement; the Boxer rebellion in China and its suppression by Western powers; the Spanish-American war over Cuba; the Dutch military 'pacification' of Aceh; the first Sino-Japanese war over the control of Korea. Rabindranath sensed the cause of the bloodbaths: greed, rabid nationalism and the Western colonial search for markets. Sonnet 64 of *Naivedya* expresses these concerns:

Today the last sun of this century has set amidst blood-coloured clouds;  
today the festival of violence rings with the frightening melodies of  
death from a multitude of weapons. The merciless snake of culture

raises in the blink of an eye its tortuous hood and fills its hidden fangs with violent poison.

Conflicts start from numerous selfish interests; greed and greed alone begets these battles; in the din of total destruction, barbarism in fashionable dress awakens from its muddy bed. Sheer injustice abandons modesty and shame in the name of love of nation: it seeks to drown religion in a flood of armies.

A gang of poets instils fear, they growl their songs of fighting dogs on a cremation-ground.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 4: 296)

In 1917, while the First World War was still raging, Rabindranath published his English lectures on nationalism under the title *Nationalism*. In the last section he summarises this Bengali sonnet in English:

The last sun of the century sets amidst the blood-red clouds of the West and the whirlwind of hatred.

The naked passion of self-love of Nations, in its drunken delirium of greed, is dancing to the clash of steel and the howling verses of vengeance.

(The English Writings, Vol. 2: 466)

In 1917 Rabindranath was more explicit in his criticism of Western-style nationalism. For that reason he added the West to his first line, which is absent and perhaps only implied in the Bengali original.<sup>19</sup>

For Rabindranath, India's hope lies in a regeneration of rationalism, self-confidence and a rejection of blind adherence to tradition. One of his most famous sonnets from *Naibedyā*, number 72, expresses this prospect:

Where thought is fearless and the head held high,  
knowledge free, where the walls of a house  
do not day and night limit the wide earth  
to the petty strip of land in the inner courtyard;  
where speech bursts out from the fountain of the heart;  
where the stream of action always flows  
unhindered in every direction over every land  
towards a thousand great accomplishments –

where the stream of thinking does not dry up  
completely in the desert sand of trivial customs;  
where vigour is not cut to pieces – where joyfully  
you always lead our actions and our thoughts –

Father, with your own hand strike without mercy  
and awaken India to such a heaven!

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 4: 299–300)<sup>20</sup>

A decade later this sonnet became famous when Rabindranath inserted an English paraphrase as poem 35 in the English *Gitanjali*.

Where the mind is without fear and the head is held high;  
 Where knowledge is free;  
 Where the world has not been broken up into fragments by narrow  
 domestic walls;  
 Where words come out from the depth of truth;  
 Where tireless striving stretches its arms towards perfection;  
 Where the clear stream of reason has not lost its way into the dreary  
 desert sand of dead habit;  
 Where the mind is led forward by thee into ever-widening thought and  
 action –  
 Into that heaven of freedom, my Father, let my country awake.  
 (The English Writings, Vol. 1: 53)

There are some differences between the two versions. They reflect the changing times and situation that the poem is supposed to address. The walls that limit the world to the inner courtyard in Bengali become ‘narrow domestic walls’ in English. The word ‘domestic’ might refer to the growing nationalism of the period 1910 around which time Rabindranath composed the English version. A more striking difference is the line that in Bengali wishes that speech come from the heart (*hrday*), but in English ‘words’ have to come ‘out of the depth of truth’, which is a significant change. The Bengali version probably means that verbal expression should not be limited by tradition but flow straight from the heart. The English suggests that speech should be truthful, not contain lies or cant. In Bengali the actions overflow the whole world, in English ‘tireless striving’ stretches ‘towards perfection’. Perhaps Rabindranath abandoned his optimism that Indian nationalists could significantly change India within a few years. It was now better to aim for doing well the things one could do. In English ‘the clear stream of reason’ may not get lost in dead habit, in Bengali the stream of thinking (*vicār*) should not get lost. Reason in English has the nuance of reasonableness, which is what Rabindranath probably wished to see in Indians in 1910. In Bengali God the Father must strike India without mercy (*nirday*), in order to awaken India. In English this is changed into a ‘heaven of freedom’. The latter is not there in Bengali. The English version reveals implied critiques both of militant nationalism as well as British colonialism. Neither of these nuances is prominent in the Bengali version.

### The Indian nation discussed

Rabindranath discussed what the Indian nation should become also in discursive form in essays, articles and lectures. Most of these appeared in books.<sup>21</sup> In August 1901 Rabindranath published two Bengali articles on

the concept of the nation in the leading Bengali magazine *Bangadarshan*. In the first one entitled *Nation ki?*, ‘What Is a Nation?’, he summarised and discussed the famous tract by the French historian Ernest Renan (1823–92) on the invention of a nation, ‘Qu’est-ce qu’une nation?’ (What is a nation?).<sup>22</sup> In the second article called *Hindutva*, ‘Hinduness’, Rabindranath used Renan’s ideas for a discussion of India as a nation.<sup>23</sup> As the original title suggests, Rabindranath rather explicitly depicts the Indian nation as a Hindu nation. In a reprint of the article in 1905 in a collection of essays called *Ātmaśakti* ‘Our Own Strength’, he changed the title *Hindutva* into *Bhāratvarṣīya Samāj*, ‘Indian Society’. Defining the essential characteristic of the concept of the nation in his first article, Rabindranath paraphrases Renan as follows:

The nation is a living entity (*sat-tā*), a mental object. Two things have constructed the inner nature of this object. These two things are in fact one and the same. One of them is situated in the past, the other in the present. One is the wealth of public memories of the past, the other the mutual consent, the desire to dwell in the same place – the desire to preserve in a suitable way the whole of the inheritance one has received. . . .

To a large extent we have already been created in the past by our forefathers. Past heroism, greatness, and glory, on these rests the national feeling. In the past a single public glory (*gaurav*), in the present a single public desire; having done great deeds jointly in the past and the resolve to perform such great deeds once more: these form the profound basis of creating a people (*janasampradāy*).

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 621)

It is clear that Rabindranath believed the Indian nation of the past to have been the Hindu nation. The evocations of past glory, heroism and sacrifice of the forefathers are the usual incentives to nation-building in the present. As we have seen in Chapters 5 and 6, it was a rhetorical technique of Hindu nationalists to point out the glory of the past and contrast it with the miserable situation of the present. Rabindranath followed this same pattern. He adopts Renan’s thesis that the nation is ‘une âme, un principe spirituel’ (a soul, a spiritual principle) (Renan 1994: 27). Thus he creates in the minds of his readers the image of an ‘imagined community’ of Hindus of the remote past. Neither geographical boundaries, nor linguistic unity are the defining principle of the ancient nation. The nation lies in the intuitive recognition of the cultural unity, or to put it differently, in the internalisation of unifying civilisational principles. Rabindranath asserts that the nation rests in the soul, not in the soil nor in political institutions:

The fact has to be accepted that geographical, i.e. natural divisions of boundaries, have largely contributed to the creation of differences among nations. Rivers have carried along peoples, mountains have impeded

them. But is that the reason for anyone to draw a map and show up exactly where it is proper to fix a nation's sovereignty (*adbikār*)? In human history natural boundaries are not final. A nation is not built on [the basis of] geography, race and language. A battlefield and a place of work are laid out on a piece of land, but a piece of land does not create the soul of a nation. Only human beings are the principal constituents of the sacred thing I call the community of people. The nation born of deep historical stirrings is a mental thing, a mental family, it is not limited by the shape of the land.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 620)

In the second article Tagore adapts Renan to the Hindu past of India. Rabindranath's greatest concern is with the unity of the nation. This unity is the 'soul of a nation', and this soul inheres in the community of people that form the nation. Now this abstract general principle has to be applied to the main subject matter, namely the Hindu nation. In order to understand what the Hindu nation is, one has to search for its unifying principle. Rabindranath asserts that the unity of the Hindu nation is based on the unifying principles underlying the coherence of society:

unity of the people's minds is not realized in all countries in one and the same sense. For this reason European unity and Hindu unity are not of the same kind, but this does not mean that there is no unity whatsoever among the Hindus.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 622)

What separates Europe ideologically from India is Hindu civilisation. The latter has given to India a specific kind of social unity not found elsewhere. According to Rabindranath, 'unity in diversity' is how one could characterise the underlying principle of Hindu civilisation, whose important binding force is *dharma*, approximately translatable by the European term 'religion'. In a Hindu sociological context, *dharma* means more than religion as private devotion; rather it means 'sacred cosmic and social ordering principle'. *Dharma* carries forth the whole of Hindu society including the society of castes, varnas and the spheres of inner renunciation, sectarian renouncers and complete individualistic renouncers. Also Rabindranath seems to entertain such a sociological notion of *dharma* for he says about Hindu civilisation in his article *Hindutva*:

With respect to the great building work of civilisation (*sabhyatā*) – i.e. uniting the variegated – we must now see what the Hindus have made of this. . . .

By giving shelter to so many different people, Hindu culture has in various ways deprived itself, and still it has not abandoned anyone. High and low, of the same class (*savarṇa*) and not of the same class

(*asavarṇa*), all of them it has drawn close, to all of them it has given the shelter of religion (*dharma*) [or sacred social and cosmic order], all of them it has forced on the path of duty (*kartavya*), thus preventing them from laxness and degradation.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 622–3)

For Rabindranath the unifying force behind Indian civilisation was the Hindu *dharma*, the immanent transcendental order underlying Hindu society and manifesting itself in the sacred hierarchy of four classes (*varna*) and numerous castes as well as the sphere of world-renunciation. Yet, Rabindranath seems to toy with these implied meanings of *dharma* as sacred order because *dharma* also denotes 'religion'. In his English writings Rabindranath uses the word 'religion' for *dharma*. The situation of his times seemed to him unsatisfactory due to a lack of energy among the Hindus. The solution he proposed consisted in social/religious reform. Religion should not be backward-looking, it should not be an unthinking emulation of the past, but rather be energised by the same spirit which informed the society-building of the forefathers. Religion does not rest on ritual, not on the narrow and exclusive solidarity of one's own small in-group. It should give 'shelter to so many different people'; in other words, it should not exclude anyone. Religion, *dharma*, is both the ordering principle of the cosmos and the gradual blossoming of the private person's ethical and spiritual potentials. Understood thus, religion turns into empowerment of all. In this respect Rabindranath reformulates the modernised Hinduism which Bankim elaborated in *Dharmatattva*:

the essential part of Hindu religion is immortal; it will always remain valid, it will help realise human well-being (*hita*), because its foundation is human nature. But in every religion all specific rules are suited to the times. In a particular period they are to be avoided or changed. This is the broad meaning of the reforms of the Hindu religion.

(Bankim Racanāvalī, II: 595–6)

As shown in Chapter 5, Bankim belongs to the modernising camp in Hinduism. He pleads for the adaptation of the outward rules and regulations of societal Hinduism to the demands of the times. The *mores* must change as long as one can preserve the eternal essence. This essence is the immutable principle, the underlying order of *dharma*, on which Hindu society is built. In his article *Hindutva* Rabindranath argues along similar lines. He first compares Hindu society to a living organism and maintains that in the past the members of society sacrificed their self-interest in the interest of the nation:

For the protection of national self-interest everyone in the nation sacrifices personal self-interests. In the times when Hindu society was full of

life, every part of society used to regard the self-interest of the integral body of society as its own ultimate self-interest.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 625)

Rabindranath uses the traditional ancient Hindu metaphor of hierarchical society as a complete human body, a metaphor found already in the Rig Veda, book 10, hymn 90. This metaphor suggests that changes in the body-politic would mean the death of society. This organic view of society implies that radical changes as brought about by revolution, for instance, would kill the living body of the social order. Organic images of society and later of the nation also imply that the hierarchical power-structures (of pre-modernity) are the natural order of things. Changing this order would be tantamount to blasphemy and upsetting the God-given order of the (social and natural) world. Rabindranath explains the implication of the organistic world-view of ancient Hindu society:

The king was a member of the same society, and it was his responsibility to protect and guide society – the Brahmin was engaged in causing the pure ideals of social religion (*samājdharmā*) to shine in society and to be forever upheld – their meditation and knowledge, instruction (*śikṣā*) and religious practice (*sādhana*) were the wealth of the whole society. Since only the householder (*grhastha*) was the pillar of society, the state of householder used to be regarded as of great importance. In order to make this state of householder prosper in knowledge, religion, thought, and action, the various powers of society used to work energetically in various directions. According to the views of those times, the precepts (*niyam*) and practices (*anuṣṭhān*) of those times were not meaningless.

Nowadays the precepts are there, but not the same sensibility (*cetanā*). While we keep the gaze fixed on the welfare of the whole society, we are in every one of our limbs lacking energy.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 2: 625)

Rabindranath sketches an ideal image of ancient Hindu society. Yet the image corresponds very well to the idea of *dharma* that permeates the Hindu social world. Rabindranath does not endorse the traditional social order he outlines here. He is aware of the changing times. Modernity could not emerge in such an organistic corporatist society. He pleads for change of Hindu society, keeping in view the universal welfare of all Hindus:

Let us install as a living reality in our hearts that same ever-wakeful feeling of well-being (*maṅgal*) [inherited] from our ancestors and apply it everywhere in society, only then will we again reach a great Hindu civilisation (*hindu-sabhyatā*). To give education to society, health, food, wealth and riches, this is our own work; this alone is our weal – this should not be regarded as trade, rather, not to hope for anything else in

exchange for this [activity] but merit (*puṇya*) and well-being (*kalyāṇ*) is sacrifice (*yajña*), is the unification with God (*Brahman*) through work (*karmayog*), to always remember this is Hindu-ness (*hindutva*).

(op. cit.: 625)

This was written in 1901 when Swami Vivekananda was still alive. Although it is speculation, one senses in Rabindranath's words a echo of Vivekananda's exhortations to Indians to build the Indian nation. One also hears echoes from the Bhagavad Gita teaching of *karmayoga* 'spiritual discipline of work' implying doing one's social caste-duties selflessly without attachment to rewards. This selfless performance of duties Rabindranath interprets as social building through education, food and economic upliftment for everyone. Bankim already promoted such a view of Hindu social duty. The following passage from Bankim's writings may bear this out:

My well-being (*maṅgal*) lies solely in the well-being of all those hundreds of thousands of Hindus. . . . If all Hindus would adhere to the same duty, than the duties of all Hindus would derive from the selfsame counsel, would depend on a single opinion, and would unitedly cooperate, this notion is the first part of forming a nation; but it is only part of the work.

(Bankim Racanāvalī, II: 239)

### The theology of Hindu modernity

In the period Rabindranath wrote these articles, he also wrote a number of religious essays in which he tried to construct a public Brahmo spirituality inspired by the Brahmoism of his father. For Rabindranath the main ingredients are the poetical utterances of the older classical Upanishads.<sup>24</sup> In these theological writings, Rabindranath often quotes the Upanishad passages that occur in the *Brahmo Dharma*. Of special importance are the sermons Rabindranath delivered in the Brahmo Samaj of Santiniketan between 1909 and 1916. Among the theological essays composed between 1901 and 1907 and published in 1909 in a collection called *Dharma*, there are titles like *Prācīn Bhārater Ekaḥ*, 'The One of Ancient India' (written in 1901), and *Dharmer Saral Ādarśa*, 'A Simple Ideal of Religion' (written in 1902).

In the essay *Dharmer Saral Ādarśa*, Rabindranath says about the religious ideal of the Upanishads:

Once our India (*Bhāratvarṣa*) did possess a simple religious ideal. We get to know it from the Upanishads. In them the revelation of Brahman (God) is complete, not limited, not encumbered by the web of our conceptualisations. . . .



The Upanishad has shown that this (social) world (*jagat-saṃsār*) full of diversity is absorbed in the endless truth of Brahman, in the endless knowledge of Brahman. The Upanishad did not imagine special heavenly abodes (*lok*), did not erect special temples, did not install special forms [of the Gods] (*mūrti*) at special places – it only perceived Him everywhere in a perfect way, and thus has completely removed every manner of complexity, every unstableness of the imagination. Where else is there such a great ideal of pure religious simplicity?

Let us not thoughtlessly proclaim that this Brahman of the Upanishad is inaccessible to us, and keep the immortal words of the seers banished from our dealings. Since the sky (*ākāś*) is not available to our grasp like a piece of stone, we cannot call it inaccessible. In fact for this very reason it is easy to enter. What can be conceived, what can be touched, is exactly what hinders us. The insignificant walls we build with our own hands are difficult to scale, but the endless sky is not difficult to scale. We have to jump over a wall, but there is no purpose in jumping over the sky. The light of the morning sun cannot be gathered like a fistful of gold, but is it therefore necessary to say that the light of the sun is difficult to obtain? Is not rather a fistful of gold difficult to obtain? And is it necessary that someone purchases and brings us the morning rays that fill the sky? The idea that the morning light is to be bought at a certain price does not enter the mind – not that it is extremely costly, it has no price.

The Brahman of the Upanishad is like that. He is everywhere inside and outside; He is the innermost One, He is most far away. By His truth we are true, by His joy we are revealed.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 7: 462–3)

In this passage it is said that the divinity encompasses the whole world, and thus India. The idea of this divinity is Indian as Rabindranath bases it on the Upanishads. The burden of the message is that ‘we’, i.e. the Indian people should not forget the simple religious ideal of the Upanishads, in other words, the heritage of the ancient Vedic seers. Rabindranath wishes his readers to immerse themselves in the inspiration of the ancient Upanishadic sages. Thus the contemporary readers will perhaps find the way back to the spiritual glory of the ancient seers. Because of the simplicity and universality of this Upanishadic message, all Indians, irrespective of caste or *varna* should be able to internalise it. Thus the Upanishadic ideal could be transformed into an egalitarian ideal of Indian nationality. The absence of Islam, however, is striking. Apparently a simple religious ideal existed only in the remote Indian past.

The passage also contains criticism of later ritualistic developments in Hinduism, for the Upanishad, unlike later Hinduism, did not ‘erect special temples, it did not install special forms at some special place’. The ideal of Brahman/God is defined around three themes: endlessness, truth and

knowledge. Brahman is endless, it is therefore endless truth and endless knowledge. Here Rabindranath interprets the first sentence of the Brahmo 'communion', the *samādhān* (*Brahmo Dharma* I.41, Taittiriya Upanishad 2.1): *satyaṁ jñānam anantam brahma* 'God is truth, knowledge, endless'. For Rabindranath non-sectarian Brahmoism represents the modern Hinduism he was most in sympathy with. For he had rejected the narrowness and sectarianism of Brahmo propagandists of his times.

This Hinduism, in his view, has to move from the complexity and locality of ritual to the ideological simplicity of the Upanishadic vision of Brahman, or to put it differently: from tradition to democratic modernity. The Upanishadic ideal can be easily internalised and is more accessible than the diversity and particularity of traditional religious lore which is highly ritualised. In this respect the Upanishadic ideal which Rabindranath propagates here, evokes a sense of inner renunciation: this type of renunciation is both purely individual and broadly universal because this individualism can be practised by members of every social group or rank. In the Upanishads pure individualism equals the realisation of the Self of oneself and of the whole world at the same time. In the sphere of total renunciation one realises the individual Self to the fullest extent. Since the Self is the source of the cosmic and thus of the social order, it is in line with Upanishadic religious sociology to claim that the realisation of one's own Self equals the realisation of the universal Self. Only in the sphere of such self-realisation the individual and the universal actually blend, yet this blending is not ontological but sociological.

Rabindranath uses the metaphor of the sky and the sunlight to show how individual and universal do blend, are one and different at the same time. What 'can be touched', i.e. palpable social differences, 'is exactly what hinders us'. We do not have to jump over the sky to be in it, and we do not pay money in order to get the sunlight. The metaphor of the universal space for the universal Self is an old one. Its probable first occurrence is in Gaudapada's Agamashastra:

Now the [universal] Self (*ātman*) – being like [universal] space [or: sky] (*ākāśa*) – has arisen as individual selves (*jīvair*) which are like the space in pots and other [containers]; the physical bodies [of these selves] are like the pots etc. [themselves]. This metaphor is [used] to [explain] the birth [of people in the social world].

(3: 3)

Rabindranath brings to mind this metaphor, using the same Sanskrit word *ākāśa* which Gaudapada uses. *Ākāśa* can mean both 'sky' and 'space'. Unlike Gaudapada, Rabindranath does not work out in detail the sky-metaphor. In the last paragraph Rabindranath paraphrases Isha Upanishad 5:

It stirs, It does not stir;  
It is far away, It is also near;

It is within this whole [world];  
It is also outside this whole [world].

At the very end of *Dharmer Saral Ādarśa* Rabindranath draws some remarkable moral conclusions from the Upanishadic religious ideal that he outlined. The Upanishads, according to him, contain a message of faith and unselfishness, a message of renunciation of selfishness. This is the message that the colonising West needs to imbibe:

One day, after much suffering and injury, these hard times will end on a huge cremation-ground. If human society will then say, that even as the worship of power, the intoxication with efficiency, the cruel mischief of self-interest became strongest, even as the darkness of illusion had become solidly dense, and partisan hungry selfishness was roaring everywhere in the North and the South, in the East and in the West; even then India had not lost her own religion, had not renounced her faith (*viśvās*), had firmly kept to her attachment to the single eternal truth. She had with all her life and with a strong hand held up the banner, high above all, of the changeless One, and in the midst of all the excitement and roaring she pronounced the mantra of *mā bhaiḥ* 'fear not', and has been saying '*ānandaṁ brahmaṇo vidvān na bibhēti kutaścana*' (*Brahmo Dharma* I.4; Taitt.Up. 2.9; brahmopasanā svadhyāyaḥ) – 'who has known the joy of the One, the joy of Brahman (God), does not fear anything'. If this is possible, the birth of the sages (*ṛṣi*) in India, the lessons of the Upanishad, the teaching of the Gita, all the suffering and insult of many centuries, all these things will become meaningful. Through endurance they will become meaningful, through religion they will become meaningful, through Brahman (God) they will become meaningful; not through arrogance, not through might, not through the accomplishment of self-interest.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 7: 467)

The cultural canon created by the ancient Indian sages, the *ṛishis*, a canon comprising the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita is now presented as the major source of Indian civilisational values. This is the canon of Vedantic religious modernity. The Upanishads were seen as its major source since Rammohun had tried to reform Hinduism on the basis of Upanishadic Vedanta. In the latter half of the nineteenth century Bankim had added the Gita to this canon. Rabindranath here simply adopts this modern Hindu canon. Less than a decade later, Arabindo promoted the study of the same Vedantic scriptures. Like Bankim, Rabindranath contrasts Hindu spiritual India with the West and its colonial enterprise searching for new markets. Rabindranath abhors the cult of political power and economic efficiency. They became for him the emblems of what he hated most about the West. He always feared the Indian nationalists might wish to wholeheartedly

adopt just these marks of Western evil and thus betray the essence of Indian civilisation and values embodied in the Upanishads and the Gita.

In *Tataḥ kim?* (What then?) from 1906 he takes up the theme of Hindu society once more.<sup>25</sup> The Upanishads still play a dominant role in this lengthy essay (the largest in the book *Dharma*) but classical Hindu mythology is brought in to illustrate a social and religious point. The unity of Hindu society is now constructed around the metaphor of the unity of Shiva and Shakti. Rabindranath's imagery is an elaboration of Keshub's image of India being ruled by the Mother Goddess; Bankim's Goddess in *Vande Mātaram*; and Arabindo's powerful Goddess in *Bhawani Mandir*. Rabindranath writes in *Tataḥ kim?*:

The ancient authors of the scriptures had wished to make in Hindu society Hara [Śiva] and Gaurī [Durgā] into an undivided body – the world with its mobile and immobile beings (*viśvacarācar*) is full of truth and beauty, because it is founded on the fixed harmony between grasping and abandoning, attraction and repulsion, centripetal and centrifugal, woman and man. On this same great harmony they [i.e. the ancient authors] had tried to found the whole of society, from beginning till end. This they had understood well that the meeting of Shiva with Shakti [the Goddess Durga as power], the meeting of inaction (*niṛṭti*) with action (*pravṛtti*), constitutes the only well-being (*maṅgal*) of society and that hostility between Shiva and Shakti is the cause of all misfortunes of society.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 7: 505)

The Upanishadic ideal of unity is there, but is reinterpreted in terms of Shiva and Shakti. Rabindranath makes these two classical Hindu Gods symbolise two cosmic forces that move in opposite directions: centripetal and centrifugal, grasping and abandoning. The harmony between these forces creates the world of inanimate and animate things and thus this harmony is also the ideal for the world of men, in other words, for Hindu society. This is what the unity of Shiva and Durga signifies. In this exposition Rabindranath once more assumes an organic concept of society. Society is not a single living body, but it is a close harmony of two bodies. Thus society forms a pair, a married couple. The imagery and wording of this passage reveal Rabindranath's profound understanding of the sociology of the Hindu social order. The God Shiva and the Goddess Shakti (another designation for the great Mother Goddess) can be understood to symbolise the two main spheres of the Hindu sacred social order. The sphere of natural hierarchical order is symbolised by Shakti in her function as nature and thus of natural organic social order. Shiva stands for the sphere of renunciation, the sphere of the spirit (at least in Brahmanical thinking). The Hindu cosmos requires both spheres: they are each other's opposites but they are complementary. The sacred social order needs the sphere of renunciation as an escape from

the vicissitudes of the ritual-social hierarchy. But the sphere of renunciation is not supposed to fundamentally alter the sacred cosmic order; it is meant to reinforce it by offering an escape. This escape-route is available only to some individuals, preferably non-conformist renouncers who may be a law unto themselves but do not do any lasting damage to the Hindu social cosmos. The renouncers that do harm the social order are usually depicted as demons (usually robbing the Gods of their legitimate share in the sacrifices). Rabindranath mentions both hemispheres of the Hindu cosmos under the names *nivritti* and *pravritti* respectively. *Nivritti* stands for renunciation, *pravritti* for the hierarchical social order. *Pravritti* implies the performance of ritual duties, *nivritti* the cessation from their performance, i.e. the substance of the sociological meaning of world-renunciation.

Rabindranath does not plead for the re-establishment of the Hindu varna-system, nor does he defend its existence and continuance in the present. But he does show awareness of the socio-religious basis of Hindu hierarchical society. He seems close to Vivekananda and Arabindo, if only for a short period in his writing career. The violence of the post-1905 anti-Partition agitations and militant Hindu nationalism made Rabindranath shrink back from further overt Hindu symbolism.

### Dissenter among dissenters

In the years following the first Partition of Bengal (1905) and the Swadeshi movement, Rabindranath became increasingly critical of the ideology of Hinduism-inspired nationalism. Asish Nandy's essay on Rabindranath's nationalism outlines this development in detail. Rabindranath voiced a criticism of nationalism that was felt by a 'small minority of Indians' to be a 'by-product of the western nation-state system and of the forces of homogenization let loose by the western worldview' (Nandy 1994: x). The alternative to this was a 'distinctive civilizational concept of universalism embedded in the tolerance encoded in various traditional ways of life in a highly diverse, plural society' (op. cit.: xi). Such a position with regard to the importation or not of Western-style nationalism into India, made Rabindranath a 'dissenter among dissenters' (op. cit.: xi). In a different way, according to Nandy, Gandhi shared this criticism of Western nationalism (cf. op. cit.: 1-3).

Rabindranath voiced his criticism among others in three novels: *Gorā* ('The White One', 1907-9), *Ghare-Bāire* ('The Home and the World', 1915-16) and *Cār Adhyāy* ('Four Chapters', 1934). Rabindranath criticises respectively: orthodox Hindu caste-consciousness, the Hindu-biased Swadeshi boycott movement and lastly the Hindu nationalist terrorist movement. Nandy calls the issues that these three novels raise 'political-psychological in *Gorā*', 'political-sociological in *Ghare-Bāire*' and 'political-ethical in *Cār Adhyāy*' (op. cit.: 10). The element of politics remains in all three.

In *Gorā* the clash between the revivalist 'orthodox' Hinduism and Brahmoism is epitomised in Gorā (in Bengali meaning 'white' or 'fair'). This Gora, a young, extremely fair ultra-Hindu Brahmin defends Hinduism and is opposed to the Brahmo Samaj and even more so to British rule over India. However, towards the end of the novel he learns that in fact he is Irish. He was left an orphan during the Mutiny of 1857 and was adopted by a Brahmin couple. In his staunch pro-Hindu views Gora resembles somewhat Sister Nivedita (the Irish disciple of Vivekananda) and Vivekananda himself (cf. Nandy, op. cit.: 36). The political-sociological issue of *Ghare-Bāire* is twofold: the coming out of seclusion of the main female character of the novel, Bimala; and the populist mob politics of the Hindu nationalist Sandip who is portrayed as a callous manipulator (cf. op. cit.: 12–14). In *Cār Adhyāy* the main issue is the murderous ruthlessness of the main male character Atin, the Hindu revolutionary who executes his beloved girlfriend Ela (cf. op. cit.: 22–4). The three novels span roughly a quarter century and a most crucial period in the history of the Indian Freedom struggle. They are Rabindranath's ongoing commentary on the Hindu nationalist component within this movement.

Rabindranath had little sympathy for the Hindu revivalist tendencies in Indian anti-colonial nationalism that became more and more prominent after 1905. In Rabindranath's view these tendencies constituted the very opposite of a modern secular India. He opposed Hindu chauvinistic tendencies on the basis of the religious values of Vedantic/Upanishadic Hindu modernity. One could argue that had Rabindranath been neutral in religious matters, or indifferent, he would not have felt so hurt by Hindu revivalism. In these novels he shows that he is hurt by Hindu revivalism because he strongly believes in a humanistic liberal Hindu modernity. The theology and ideology of his own Brahmo Samaj form part of this. Within the same period he wrote *Gorā* and *Ghare-Bāire*, he also wrote his numerous sermons for the Brahmo Samaj (between 1909 and 1916). His devotional poetry of *Gītāñjali*, followed by *Gītmālya* and *Gītāli*, was written between 1909 and 1914. Rabindranath combined in his writings trenchant criticism of Hindu chauvinism with a theological and aesthetic deepening of individualist humanist Upanishadic Hinduism.

Rabindranath's nationalism always maintained a universalist characteristic. Or, in the words of Asish Nandy: 'Tagore refused to grant primacy to politics even while sometimes participating in politics' (op. cit.: 80). The central theme in Rabindranath's universalism was 'a large, plural concept of India' that yet 'denied moral and cultural relativism' (op. cit.: 81). This universalism is not typically Tagorean. Rammohun Roy was probably the first to view Indian problems in their relation to the rest of the world (cf. op. cit.: 81). Nandy observes that Indian nationalism 'still . . . reflected . . . what could be called the ultimate civilizational ambition of India: to be the cultural epitome of the world and to redefine or convert all passionate self-other debates into self-self debates' (op. cit.: 82). Furthermore, nationalism

was and is a 'direct product of the western past', and 'consolidated the western presence on the cultural plane, while it nurtured the rebellion against the West on the political plane' (op. cit.: 89). The latter observation is shared by among others Partha Chatterjee. The observation needs some qualification. Western nationalism as a carrier of modernity was the product of the European Reformation as we have tried to show in Chapters 2 and 3. The Hindu reformation was to some extent modelled after the Western one. Similarly, Hindu modernity was grafted on this Hindu reformation. Hindu nationalism was a by-product of the Hindu reformation. Up to the first decades of the twentieth century Hindu nationalism and Indian nationalism were often tacitly regarded as congruous. Indian nationalism often was indistinguishable from Hindu nationalism and Hindu modernity-discourses. This equivalence proved ominous in the twenties and the thirties. Rabindranath was probably the first to clearly recognise this ambivalent tendency. Consequently, from the period of writing *Gorā* onwards he began to warn against anti-Muslim Hindu chauvinism posing as Indian nationalism.

Scholars have noticed the change in Rabindranath's tone. Sumit Sarkar in his study on the Swadeshi movement in Bengal devotes some pages to Rabindranath. Sarkar notes that around 1907–8, the period in which *Gorā* was written, there is 'decisive break with the temper of much of' Rabindranath's 'earlier swadeshi writings and a return (on a higher plane, one is tempted to add) to a basically antitraditionalist and modernist approach' (Sarkar 1973: 83). A few pages later, Sarkar adds: 'Antitraditionalism in fact was to pervade virtually all of Tagore's post-1907 writing. The vision of an India united on a modern basis transcending all barriers of caste, religion and race inspired the last pages of *Gora*' (op. cit.: 85). It is such a vision which, according to Asish Nandy,

saves *Gora* from his narrow nationalism and brings him closer to his mother and, by implication, motherland . . . a self overly well defined and exclusive could not . . . be an authentic Indian self capable of serious relationships with other Indians and Indianness.

(Nandy 1994: 42)

Michael Sprinker in his essay on *Home and the World* agrees with Sarkar's observation that Rabindranath's post-1907 writings show antitraditionalism and that the final pages of *Gora* evoke a vision of a secular India (cf. Datta 2005: 112). In her essay on *Gora* and *The Home and the World* in the same volume, Malini Bhattacharya quotes with appreciation the same observation by Sarkar (cf. Datta 2005: 127). These scholars put forward the consensus that after 1907 when Rabindranath noticed the Hindu communal tendencies that accompanied the Swadeshi Movement, he changed the tone of his writings from Hinduistic to liberal secular. The Hinduistic passages from the pre-1907 period we have already quoted at some length. The point

remains if Rabindranath also fundamentally changed his mind about his own version of Hindu modernity.

Looking at the actual passage from *Gorā* which Sarkar refers to, we may be able to offer a significant qualification to this consensus opinion. Let us turn to the last chapter of *Gorā* where Gora learns he is not a Hindu.<sup>26</sup> The scene is a conversation between Gora and Paresh Babu, a mildly mannered and untypical Brahmo. Gora – who had hitherto been the paragon of Hindu chauvinism – is bursting into the house of Paresh Babu. The following dialogue ensues which I quote in full in order to show all the logical sequence of all the arguments:

GORA burst out: “Paresh Babu, I’ve got no more ties.” In astonishment

Paresh BABU ASKED: “Ties to what?”

GORA REPLIED: “I’m not a Hindu.”

PARESH BABU: “You’re not a Hindu?”

GORA: “No, I’m not a Hindu. Today I learned that I was a foundling from the times of the Mutiny. My father was Irish. The doors of every Hindu temple, from North to South India, are closed to me today; nowhere in the country can I sit down anymore to eat at a caste-dinner, nor at any other place. . . .

Do you understand what I’m saying? What I always wanted to be and could not be, I am now. Today I’m an Indian. There is no clash in me with any community (*samāji*), be it Hindu, Muslim or Christian. Today every caste of India is my caste, every food is my food. . . . Today I became so pure that even in the dwelling of a *caṇḍāl*<sup>27</sup> there’s no danger of pollution. Paresh Babu, this morning with a fully open heart I prostrated myself before the lap (*kol*) of India. Only now have I experienced in full what is called Mother’s lap (*kroḍ*).”

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 3: 663–4)

The obvious interpretation of this passage is the one we have already referred to here. Rabindranath simply makes Gora reject orthodox Hinduism and adopt Indian secularism. All the signs in the text point in that direction: Gora comes to know he is not a Hindu after all, and consequently he cannot sit at any caste-dinner. His presence as a *mleccha* or the son of a *sahib* would prevent him from being acknowledged as a Brahmin. He need not be afraid anymore of losing his caste, because now he has none left. He is certainly not a Brahmin. He is not even afraid that he would lose any purity when he enters the house of a chandal. In a way, Gora has become the same as the chandal. He claims every Indian food to be his food and every Indian caste to be his caste. What could be more secular than this? But let us look a bit closer at all the things that Gora is losing while he yet remains Indian, or even becomes more Indian than he was before. The things that he is losing: caste, ritual purity, Brahmin status. In other words, he loses his status



in the Hindu social hierarchy, hierarchy determined by notion of Hindu ritual purity and pollution. Thus he drops out of Hindu caste-society. His position is no different from that of the (Hindu) world-renouncer. Gora has, to put it bluntly, been made a world-renouncer by God Himself. We must remember that in Bankim's as well as Vivekananda's and Aurobindo's writings, world-renunciation of sorts was the prerequisite of Hindu patriotism. Here in Gora's case there is the same situation. Gora is now a world-renouncer from the social Hindu point of view. The sphere of renunciation is above and beyond hierarchical society and ritual purity. For this very reason, Gora can now be an Indian to all Indians and will not incur ritual pollution by entering the house of a scavenger because he cannot lose any ritual purity and social status anymore. The renouncer lives in a sphere that is a kind of beyond here and now. We should remember that the ethos of world-renunciation also played an important part in Debendranath's concept of Brahmoism, and that Keshub also used it to highlight his religious innovations. Swami Vivekananda was formally a world-renouncer which accounts to a large extent for the charismatic aura he could surround himself with.

The *santans* in Bankim's *Anandamath* were world-renouncers. It is therefore possible to read *Gorā* as Rabindranath's answer to *Anandamath*. *Gorā* is Rabindranath's commentary on *Anandamath*. The *santans* were violent. Gora is the prototype of the non-violent Indian patriot. But he is also a world-renouncer. He is in a way forced to it by circumstance, but he also regards it as an act of God. This latter element should not be lightly dismissed as a mere whim of the poet. The world-renunciation of Gora is a gift of God. That is what the poet wants to convey. This God is not the God of the Hindus only, but the universal God of the major world-religions that are practised in India: Hinduism, Islam, Christianity and Brahmoism. Such a view of God in no way deviates from the doctrines and realisations of Sri Ramakrishna. Keshub had also experimented with such a universalistic concept of God. Rabindranath seems to tacitly endorse such a view.

### The nation criticised

In the years after *Gorā* Rabindranath became explicit and vocal about the negative aspects of the West and critical of nationalism, also of Indian anti-colonial nationalism when the latter advocated violent means to overthrow the Raj. The outbreak of the First World War only reinforced Rabindranath's revulsion against Western-style violent nationalism. He began to regard nationalism as an evil imported from the West. He regarded the nation-state as an evil Western invention. His criticism of Western-style nationalism – in fact amounting to a critique of the modern state whose origins lie in the West – he had been bringing forward in his novel *Ghare-Bāire* (1916) and in lectures in English.<sup>28</sup> The latter he published in 1917 under the title

*Nationalism.* At the outset he already distinguished sharply between society and the state:

A nation, in the sense of the political and economic union of a people, is that aspect which a whole population assumes when organised for a mechanical purpose. Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is the spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being. . . . It has also a political side, but this is only for a special purpose. It is for self-preservation. It is merely the side of power, not of human ideals.

(The English Writings, Vol. 2: 421)

This 'side of power' is the political and economic apparatus of the modern nation-state:

In the West the national machinery of commerce and politics turns out neatly compressed bales of humanity which have their use and high market value; but they are bound in iron hoops, labelled and separated off with scientific care and precision.

(op. cit.: 420)

Furthermore when this 'organisation of politics and commerce, whose other name is the Nation, becomes all-powerful at the cost of the harmony of the higher social life, then it is an evil day for humanity' (op. cit.: 422). The colonial state is such an evil being:

This abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India. We have seen in our country some brand of tinned food advertised as entirely made and packed without being touched by hand. This description applies to the governing of India, which is as little touched by the human hand as possible. The governors need not know our language, need not come into personal touch with us except as officials.

(op. cit.: 422-3).

This kind of nation cum modern state is not necessary for India. Or in other words, India does not need this kind of nationalism:

India never had a real sense of nationalism. Even though from childhood I had been taught that idolatry of the Nation is almost better than reverence for God and humanity, I believe I have outgrown that teaching, and it is my conviction that my countrymen will truly gain their India by fighting against the education which teaches them that a country is greater than the ideals of humanity.

The educated Indian at present is trying to absorb some lessons from history contrary to the lessons of our ancestors. The East, in fact, is

attempting to take unto itself a history, which is not the outcome of its own living.

(op. cit.: 456)

In short, 'Nationalism is a great menace. It is the particular thing which for years has been at the bottom of India's troubles' (op. cit.: 458). This 'menace', Rabindranath explains, is the revolutionary activity of some Indian nationalists who seek to violently overthrow the British Raj. These radical nationalists were called 'extremists'. As we have seen in the previous chapter, their intellectual mentor was Arabindo Ghose. Also Rabindranath uses the term 'extremists' for these radical nationalists. Speaking about them in relation to the Indian National Congress, he maintains:

there arrived the Extremists, who advocated independence of action, and discarded the begging method – the easiest method of relieving one's mind from his responsibility towards his country. Their ideals were based on Western history. They had no sympathy with the special problems of India. . . . What should we do if, for any reason, England was driven away? We should simply be victims for other nations. . . . The thing we in India have to think of is this – to remove those social customs and ideals which have generated a want of self-respect and a complete dependence on those above us – a state of affairs which has been brought about entirely by the domination in India of the caste system, and the blind and lazy habit of relying upon the authority of traditions that are incongruous anachronisms in the present age.

(op. cit.: 459)

Rabindranath neither sympathises with the moderate wing of the Indian National Congress, nor with the extremists, nor with traditional Hinduism of *varna* and castes. He mentions the 'caste system' of whose workings in society he was well aware. He does not advocate Westernisation to remove the social ills of India, but he wants the Indians to generate self-respect and to discard the 'lazy habit of relying upon the authority of tradition'. The latter wish he had expressed in 1901, already appeared in *Naivedya* 72: 'where the stream of thinking does not dry up/completely in the desert sand of trivial customs'.

The solution to India's problems does not lie in the full adoption of Western-style nationalism. For this would mean the full adoption of the modern state apparatus. This apparatus the colonial state was already building up to the detriment of India. India should modernise herself in her own way, not politically but socially, culturally:

The ideals that strive to take form in social institutions have two objects. One is to regulate our passions and appetites for the harmonious development of man, and the other is to help him to cultivate disinterested

love for his fellow-creatures. Therefore society is the expression of those moral and spiritual aspirations of man which belong to his higher nature.

(op. cit.: 461)

Once more Rabindranath castigates his fellow nationalists: 'When our nationalists talk about ideals they forget that the basis of nationalism is wanting. The very people who are upholding . . . ideals are themselves the most conservative in their social practice' (op. cit.: 463). Rabindranath astutely observes the Hindu social conservatism of Hindu nationalists who speak about modernisation and reform but do not practise these in their own lives. Building the Indian nation, in Rabindranath's view, could not be accomplished by quick and violent means, by a process of rapidly gaining political independence; it ought to be accomplished the long and hard way, by social work, by changing the mentality of the elites, by disseminating new concepts of modern Indian civilisation. In this respect Rabindranath's own literary activity stands out as a worthy example. In his many works he fashioned the Indian cultural modernity which he thought India needed in order to become independent of the West, especially from Western institutional modernity. Between 1901 and 1917 he did not change his ideas about the Indian nation and the path to its future civilisation. Nor did he shed his belief in the necessity of cultural independence for India. Rather, the implications for India of the introduction of a Western-style state worried him more and more. He also became increasingly aware of the communalist implications of militant Hindu nationalism. In his writings he increasingly points to the violent anti-Muslim stance of many Hindu nationalists.<sup>29</sup> Yet he did not distance himself from the heritage of the Upanishads. His critique of nationalism and the state was ethical. He raised his voice against the dehumanising mentality of the colonial state. The state needed to inculcate such a mentality in the population and the civil servants in order to rule smoothly and efficiently. The real Indian nation was an ethical and aesthetic concept, a vision of ever evolving human creative potential, of growing spiritual and political empowerment, not only for India but for the whole world. After *Gorā* (1909) Rabindranath's vision more and more turned into the vision of an outsider and of a person out of step with the current of the times. Indian nationalists did not heed Rabindranath's ethical warnings, nor did they care for his mildly mannered Brahmoistic Hindu modernity. In the years of the paper *Bande Mataram* and the Alipore conspiracy case they preferred the robust Hindu ideology of Arabindo and his followers.

### **Fulfilment of the individualist Hindu reformation**

Rabindranath's contributions to Hindu modernity did not stop after *Gorā*. The volumes of religious essays and sermons of *Śāntiniketan* cover a period up to 1916, that is, well into the time that Rabindranath had gained world

fame and the Nobel Prize for literature (in 1913). The theme of a personal God found deeper expression in the volumes *Gītāñjali*, *Gītimālya* and *Gītāli*. God as lover, or God and beloved; these two are often inseparable in these short lyrical poems. The poems of all three volumes address both an earthly beloved or God; they are love poetry in the erotic sense of the word and they are devotional poetry at the same time. Ancient and medieval Vaishnava *bhakti* texts both in Sanskrit and the regional languages already show this mixture. Yet Rabindranath does not write *as* a Vaishnava even if he writes sometimes *like* a Vaishnava. He merely uses the Vaishnava poetics of translating the love of God into human love-relations like the love for a child, love for/loyalty to a friend, love for parents, loving loyalty to a king and the love for a paramour. Rabindranath hints at the latter possibility but does not elaborate the old Vaishnava literary technique of the *rasas* (emotional flavours of a poetic composition) and their combinations. In his devotional poetry Rabindranath is a twentieth-century modern poet. The religious atmosphere in the poems of the *Gītāñjali* period harks back to the Sudder Street experience. The sign for this is the image of the rising sun and the lifting of a curtain. As in poem 6 of the Bengali *Gītāñjali*:

Flooding the heavens and the earth with love  
and life, with song and fragrance, light and joy,  
your spotless draught of immortality is raining down.  
Today your joy assumed a solid form  
which razed all obstacles on every path;  
now life is filled with sweet intensity.

My consciousness, rich with the juice of weal,  
in uttermost delight is blooming like a lotus  
laying all its nectar at your feet.  
In soundless light arose the purple loveliness  
of mighty dawn into my darkened heart;  
the veil before my lazy eyes was lifted.

(Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 6: 16)

This little poem reads like a summary of the large poem ‘The Awakening of the Waterfall’ which Rabindranath maintained he wrote down in the enlightened state of mind experienced at sunrise in Sudder Street. The divine light penetrates the inner being of the poet and thus removes all inner obstacles, the ‘covering of melancholy which pressed in layer upon layer on’ his heart (Ravindra-Racanāvalī, Vol. 9: 492). As the poet was watching ‘it suddenly seemed as if immediately a curtain was pulled up before’ his eyes (op. cit.). In *Gītāñjali* 6 the divinity floods the universe with love, life, music and joy. This same divinity smooths the poet’s life’s path and fills it ‘with sweet intensity’. The cosmic deity becomes the God of the poet’s life and in both cosmic and personal manifestation enlightens the poet’s consciousness.

The Indian theologian and philosopher Jose Chunkapura devoted a full-length study to Rabindranath's concept of God (Chunkapura 2002). In his study Chunkapura calls the period after *Gītāñjali* the 'years of mature reflection', a period which lasts till 1927. Chunkapura takes the English *Gitanjali*, published in 1912, to be a turning point. The reason for this is the Western recognition of Tagore as 'a great poet and thinker' (Chunkapura 2002: 168).<sup>30</sup> For our purpose of elucidating Rabindranath Tagore's contribution to Hindu modernity, it will be wise to lay importance on his English writings on religion, as much as on the earlier writings in Bengali. In the last part of this chapter we will pay attention to the English works on religion which Tagore wrote during the last decades of his life. These writings are important as they are the last contributions towards the liberal Protestant theology of Brahmoism. They were composed in the last period of Tagore's creative life, the period which Chunkapura calls 'the final years'.

The year 1912 does not constitute a clear turning point, rather a natural transition from writing in Bengali on Upanishadic Hinduism to writing in English on the same topic, but now with a world audience in view. Tagore quickly realised that after the Nobel Prize his readership had widened beyond imagination. From a well-known Bengali poet he had now become a world-poet who needed to communicate in English in order to be heard. But this was not extraordinary. His great predecessor Rammohun had done this too, writing both in English and Bengali.

Tagore's first volume of religious essays in English was the book *Sadhana*, published in 1913. *Sadhana* is the first book by which the non-Bengali speaking world got acquainted with Tagore's ideas about liberal Hinduism. He avoided using the term Hinduism to designate his religion, but in all eight chapters he liberally quoted from the Upanishads, Buddhist scriptures and occasionally from the Bhagavad Gita. In the Preface Tagore stated where his religious allegiances lay. Speaking about himself in the third person he claimed:

The writer has been brought up in a family where the texts of the Upanishads are used in daily worship; he has had before him the example of his father, who lived his long life in the closest communion with God, while not neglecting his duties to the world.

(The English Writings, Vol. 2: 278)

Tagore does not conceal the fact that he came from a Brahmo background, nor that his father was an important source of inspiration. In the same paragraph Tagore adds that 'it may be hoped, western readers will have an opportunity of coming into touch with the ancient spirit of India as revealed in our sacred texts' (op. cit.: 278). Tagore does refer to Christianity positively but also testifies that to him

the verses of the Upanishads and the teachings of Buddha have ever been things of the spirit . . . I have used them, both in my own life and

in my preaching, as being instinct with individual meaning for me . . . and awaiting for their confirmation, my own special testimony, which must have its value because of its individuality.

(op. cit.: 278)

If the ancient spirit of India is to be found anywhere, it is for Tagore in the Upanishads and the texts of the Pali canon. This is the drift of Tagore's argument here. Like Rammohun and Debendranath, Rabindranath goes back to the Upanishads as the sources of Hinduism as it should be. That these texts are not dogmatic scriptural revelation but stand in need of personal 'confirmation' in order to be true as religious documents, brings Tagore close to the traditional position of a (Hindu) world-renouncer. Ultimate religious authority derives from direct experience, not from mere adherence or uncritical assent to formulated doctrines.<sup>31</sup> Also in this respect Tagore stands firmly within traditional Hinduism. He does not endorse formal world-renunciation in the traditional sectarian form, nor total individual renunciation. But his mood here is that of the inner renouncer.

Tagore's inner renunciation is the source of his religion and his creativity. Thus his religion fulfils a social role. It wants to communicate with the social world. Tagore, in the same book, gave his description of religion as *dharma*. Religion is the *dharma* that frees the individual; it is not a code of conduct within a hierarchical sacred social order. Rather, it is what enables every individual to follow a calling and develop inborn talents in originality:

We gain our freedom when we attain our truest nature. The man who is an artist finds his artistic freedom when he finds his ideal of art. Then is he freed from laborious attempts at imitation, from the goadings of popular approbation. It is the function of religion not to destroy our nature but to fulfil it.

The Sanskrit word *dharma* which is usually translated into English as religion has a deeper meaning in our language. *Dharma* is the innermost nature, the essence, the implicit truth, of all things. *Dharma* is the ultimate purpose that is working in our self.

(op. cit.: 308)

Tagore's *dharma* emphatically enjoins people to remain in society and work out their destiny there. Like his father, Rabindranath holds a work ethic that looks Protestant: rejection of factual world-renunciation; following one's own *dharma* (which could be interpreted as developing one's talents to their fullest); and working *in* society for the glory of God. This type of work ethic was available in the concept of *karma-yoga* as taught in the Gita. Tagore speaks of those who have realised the soul and 'desire in their joy to express themselves strenuously in their life and in their work' (op. cit.: 327). Furthermore, '*dharma* consists not in the neglect of action but in the effort to attune it closer and closer to the eternal harmony . . . the soul is to dedicate

itself to Brahma through all its activities' (op. cit.: 330). All this work cannot be done in sheer isolation, but it must be relevant and useful to society as whole. Tagore makes this clear in a passage in which society is compared to an organism:

We have a greater body which is the social body. Society is an organism, of which we as parts have our individual wishes. We want our own pleasure and licence . . . there is that other wish in us which does its work in the depths of the social being. It is the wish for the welfare of the society. It transcends the limits of the present and the personal. It is on the side of the infinite.

He who is wise tries to harmonise the wishes that seek for self-gratification with the wish for the social good, and only thus can he realise his higher self.

(op. cit.: 312)

Now, self-realisation, in Tagore's view, consists in striving for the social good, for the welfare of society as a whole. Tagore's text seems to reflect a good knowledge of Bankim's idea of *karma-yoga* as explained in *Dharmatattva* to which we referred in Chapter 5. Bankim spoke of protecting the country, Tagore speaks of promoting the welfare of society. Bankim is a Hindu nationalist, Tagore a liberal Hindu Protestant and social thinker.

Tagore continued to write on religion till the end of his life. *Sadhana* of 1913 was the English first fruit of his thought around the time of the Bengali *Gītāñjali*. Around 1930 came another set of texts dealing primarily with religion. In English this harvest was published in 1931 under the title *The Religion of Man*. Actually this book contains the Hibbert lectures that Tagore delivered in 1930 at Manchester College, Oxford. In the Preface Tagore explains that the theme of religion runs through all his lectures and addresses and this proves

The fact that one theme runs through all [lectures and addresses] only proves to me that the Religion of Man has been growing within my mind as a religious experience and not merely as a philosophical subject. In fact, a very large portion of my writings, beginning from the earlier products of my immature youth down to the present time, carry an almost continuous trace of the history of this growth. To-day I am made conscious of the fact that the works that I have started and the words that I have uttered are deeply linked by a unity of inspiration whose proper definition has often remained unrevealed to me.

(The English Writings, Vol. 3: 85)

Tagore wrote this in 1930, 11 years before his death. This preface announces the content of the chapters that follow: different aspects and manifestations of what Tagore calls the religion of man, but these words equally summarise



Tagore's growing insight in his own artistic and religious development throughout his life. He quite explicitly claims a deep and often hidden religious inspiration behind much of his literary output. The 'unity of inspiration' linking all his works is the religion of man. This religion, however, is strongly coloured by the Upanishads which Tagore continues to quote almost till the very end of his life. This might mean that what Tagore calls the religion of man, is really the Hindu religion of an individual person arrived at through poetic/epiphanic experience. The sequel will bear this out. The original source or the first starting point of Tagore's religion of man is once again the Sudder Street experience, as well as the spiritual legacy of his father. In chapter 6 entitled 'The Vision' Tagore describes both:

I was born in a family which, at that time, was earnestly developing a monotheistic religion based upon the philosophy of the Upanishads. Somehow my mind at first remained coldly aloof. . . . It was through an idiosyncrasy of my temperament that I refused to accept any religious teaching merely because people in my surroundings believed it to be true.

(The English Writings, Vol. 3: 120)

It is not untypical of Hindu spirituality not to believe in doctrines about God, the divine or the transcendent, but rather to be sceptical about them. Hinduism demands direct experience of the immanent transcendent, and this in a state of heightened consciousness, a state that could be identified with inner world-renunciation. Tagore continues:

When I was eighteen, a sudden spring breeze of religious experience for the first time came to my life and passed away leaving in my memory a direct message of spiritual reality. One day while I stood watching at early dawn the sun sending out its rays from behind the trees, I suddenly felt as if some ancient mist had in a moment lifted from my sight . . . the morning light on the face of the world revealed an inner radiance of joy. The invisible screen of the commonplace was removed from all things and all men. . . . That which was memorable in this experience was its human message, the sudden expansion of my consciousness in the super-personal world of man.

(The English Writings, Vol. 3: 121)

Tagore regards this and similar experiences he had as a message from the divinity. This divinity is steering his life from behind the screen of the poet's personality:

I felt sure that some Being who comprehended me and my world was seeking his best expression in all my experiences, uniting them into an ever-widening individuality which is a spiritual work of art.

To this Being I was responsible; for the creation in me is his as well as mine. It may be that it was the same creative Mind that is shaping the universe to its eternal idea.

(The English Writings, Vol. 3: 122)

This Being seems to be the *Jīvandevatā*, the God of his life, to whom Tagore dedicated the poem with this title. Tagore gives an English rendering of the Bengali poem *Jīvandevatā* in the same chapter from which the quotation cited here is taken. Note that in the meanwhile there is a time gap of almost half a century, and still the poem is relevant for Tagore. Not that Tagore did not develop in these years. But the basic themes have remained unchanged. One could argue that in *The Religion of Man* Tagore conceived of his religion in terms of humanism, not in terms of strict nineteenth-century Brahmoism. And yet even *The Religion of Man* is filled with quotations from Hindu scriptures, mostly the Upanishads.

The penultimate chapter is called 'The Four Stages of Life' and discusses the merits of the Hindu social division of the human life-cycle for the upper-castes into four stages: *brahmacharya* or 'the period of discipline in education'; *garhasthya* 'world's work'; *vanaprasthya* 'retreat for the loosening of bonds'; *pravrajya* 'expectant awaiting of freedom across death' (The English Writings, Vol. 3: 169). All this formed part of the social system of ancient India. Tagore remarks: 'India had originally accepted the bonds of her social system in order to transcend society, as the rider puts reins on his horse and stirrups on his own feet in order to ensure greater speed towards his goal' (op. cit.: 168). The goal was gaining spiritual freedom, which is the traditional Hindu goal to be achieved through world-renunciation.

Tagore distinguishes between the West with its science regarding material objects and 'the final freedom of spirit which India aspires after'. India seeks that which is 'beyond all limits of personality . . . the pure consciousness of Being, the ultimate reality, which has an infinite illumination of bliss' (op. cit.: 166). Once more the complementary contrast between science and religion: 'the moral and spiritual basis of the realm of human values . . . belongs to our religion. As science is the liberation of our knowledge in the universal reason . . . religion is the liberation of our individual personality in the universal Person' (op. cit.: 167). Moreover 'our teachers in ancient India realized the soul of man as something very great indeed. They saw no end to its dignity, which found its consummation in Brahma himself' (op. cit.: 168). If we summarise we get the following picture: the West is materialistic and produced science. This is a view that was promulgated in the nineteenth century by among others Bankim. Ancient Indian civilisation (read Hindu civilisation) held the socio-religious ideal of personal freedom consisting in approaching the cosmic Person or Brahman. This ideal could not be reached just like that: it had to be gradually reached through the social system of four life-stages (in conformity with Brahminical socio-religious doctrine as found in the Dharmashastras). This image of ancient India does not differ

much from that of Hindu nationalists like Bankim, Vivekananda and Arabindo. Tagore had distanced himself from the violent implications of that nationalism but not from the Hindu cultural self-image of this nationalism. It is true, Tagore does not write like a Hindu nationalist entirely and avoids using the word Hinduism. He also does not defend the Hindu social order of four varnas and numerous castes. Yet he presents, even this late in his life, a picture of ancient India (which is also still his ideal point of reference) almost totally in conformity with Brahminism (not even Brahmoism anymore). In other words, Tagore's religion is a modern version of ideas found in the Upanishads, the Gita and a bit of the Dharmashastras. An able and inspiring poet and writer, Tagore does not deviate much from either his earlier views on liberal Hinduism, nor from the other reforming Hindu thinkers we have discussed in these pages. Like his contemporaries Vivekananda and Arabindo, Tagore devotes little attention to Islam. He is not hostile to Islam but hardly includes it explicitly in his evocations of Indian religion which for Tagore does not mean much else but Upanishadic Hinduism, Vedanta, teachings of Buddha and the songs of renunciatory sects like the Vaishnavas and the Bauls. Tagore was the first to recognise the Bauls as important bearers of 'low-caste' non-Brahminical world-renunciation as they were great poets in their own right.

Intellectually and spiritually, the mild liberal Hindu reformation of Bengal found in Tagore its acme, but also its culminating final end. Tagore in his ripe old age was the last living representative – and the most talented one with the largest global impact – of the Bengal Hindu Reformation. Tagore gave his very last religious testimonies in 1933 with three lectures in Bengali at Calcutta University, under the title *Mānuṣer Dharma* 'religion of man'. These lectures are a sequel to *The Religion of Man* (the title is identical). In 1933 Tagore held the same Bengali lectures in English at the Andhra University. These lectures in English were published under the title *Man* in 1937.

The scope of *Man* is more limited than of *The Religion of Man*. In *Man* Tagore explores in greater detail than in *The Religion of Man*, the relation between human personality, human society and humanity's God. But in chapter 1 of *The Religion of Man* Tagore already announced this theological issue, relating it directly to the Sudder Street experience:

The idea of the humanity of our God, or the divinity of Man the Eternal, is the main subject of this book. This thought of God . . . suddenly flashed into my consciousness with a direct vision. The experience which I have described in one of the chapters<sup>32</sup> which follow convinced me that on the surface of our being we have the ever-changing phases of the individual self, but in the depth there dwells the Eternal Spirit of human unity beyond our direct knowledge.

(The English Writings, Vol. 3: 88)

The 'humanity of God' in Tagore's view seems to equal 'the divinity of Man'. The echo of the *Jīvandevatā* concept can be heard (after all this poem occurs in an English version in *The Religion of Man*, op. cit.: 123). Quite in line with a general tendency in Hinduism, Tagore thinks that 'God' means little as a purely theological/philosophical concept. 'God' needs to be personally experienced. In this passage Tagore states his belief that God is dwelling in the depth of the individual self as the 'Eternal Spirit of human unity'. In order to be meaningful for humanity, God must be somehow human or humanly recognisable and reachable as an ideal towards which (almost unknowingly) humanity as a whole strives. Tagore embraces the idea of natural and human evolution and connects this with the Upanishadic concept of the Supreme Self (or inner ruler, *antaryāmin*), reinterpreted as the 'Eternal Spirit of humanity'.

This spirit is hidden within the individual; often the individual person is not even aware of this spirit. This spirit moves individual and collective man towards ever new accomplishments. All three essays of *Man* Tagore devotes to this single theme: man 'hides a mystery of depth within himself . . . he will finally know himself only when the veils of the mystery have been pierced . . . he is far greater than what he externally appears to be' (The English Writings, Vol. 3: 195). This 'mystery' is the realisation 'in oneself' of 'the humanity which is universal and of all times . . . all this would have no meaning unless man had a spiritual self over and above his natural self' (op. cit.: 200). The spiritual self causes the natural self to strive for achievements that transcend natural abilities. This is possible because the 'greater self of man is contrary to nature' (op. cit.: 201). The great achievements beyond the natural are the domain of moral greatness beyond the confines of the ego. For in

the world which is the field of the ego, man boasts of his bulk, but in the world where his spirit dwells, his perfection is in greatness. . . [because] excellence, heroism and sacrifice reveal the soul of man: they transcend the isolated man and realize the Universal Man who dwells in the inmost heart of all individuals.

(op. cit.: 201)

Evolution of humanity proceeds through the commitment of errors. This is true in the world of scientific discovery as in the world of the spirit. The latter world is the province of what Tagore broadly designates as 'religion'. Religion is a dangerous thing though. Tagore distinguishes between errors in knowledge and errors in 'being'. Error in 'being' is a perversion which 'in the name of community or religion incites man's will to evil far more than scientific mistakes' (op. cit.: 206). Tagore hints at the rising communal tensions between radical extremist Hindus against Indian Muslims, tensions that were severely rocking India from the 1920s onwards well into

the forties, and threw a dark shadow over the movement towards Indian independence. Tagore exclaims:

The communal god . . . becomes the receptacle of hatred, vanity, snobishness and stupidity. Insulted Godhead degrades man and keeps him in constant fear of his own fellows. This calamity strikes at the very root of power and fortune in our country.

(op. cit.: 206)

Communalism is perverted religion and therefore threatening India's fortune. Tagore does not condemn religion as such. He condemns the perversion of religion. He censures false perverted 'hate' Hinduism, and does this in the name of noble and true Hinduism, even while avoiding the term Hinduism: 'The community gives the name of religion to its own traditional opinion, and thus strikes at Religion itself' (op. cit.: 207).

For Tagore true religion means the gradual realisation of universal humanity within the individual person who is also always a member of society. Individuals are part of society. Tagore compares the individual by himself or herself with the earth turning around its axis; but as part of society the individual is like the earth turning around the sun: 'wealth and power are accumulated through the urge of the individual ego, and yet . . . under the inspiration of the Universal Man, men unite with one another in their activity and their joy and make sacrifices for one another's sake' (op. cit.: 207). Making sacrifices brings to mind the moral inspiration in man, an inspiration which Tagore regards as a sign of the Universal Man. To make sacrifices on behalf of others means abandoning one's ego and its demands. Tagore illustrates this point by pointing out that the different religious traditions in the world all attempt at harmonising the 'animal man limited by his self-seeking' with the 'Universal Man' (op. cit.: 209). Human history is like a journey, a ceaseless quest 'for the revelation of the Universal Man in the world of men, to rescue his own inmost truth from the crude obstacles set up by himself' (op. cit.: 210).

Rescuing the inmost truth from human obstacles amounts to the realisation of the Universal Man; the realisation of divine immensity, *bhūmā* in the language of the Chandogya Upanishad (7.23.1), a word to which Tagore more than once returns to describe divine immensity. This immensity in man is God 'within his own soul as detached from his ego' (op. cit.: 211). Tagore asserts that it 'is easy to place one's God outside and worship him through traditional ceremonies, observances of injunctions and taboos' (op. cit.: 211). Although Hinduism and its complex sacred social order is not mentioned, it is difficult to imagine Tagore had anything else but Hinduism and its extensive caste-rules and large public and private pujas in mind. After all, he was raised in Hinduism and was surrounded by Hindus (not all of whom shared his liberal Brahmo outlook). Tagore insists on the need to personally realise this God of immensity, but he also admits that in daily life

it is difficult 'to realize . . . the divine man in our own thoughts and actions' (op. cit.: 211).

To realise is to strive for spiritual union with the Universal Man through love of humanity. Tagore refers to the Upanishads to illustrate this: 'The truth which has been acknowledged by our scriptures, known as "I am He" – *so'ham*, . . . carries the assurance of the truth of a grand unity which waits to be realized and justified by the individual' (op. cit.: 212).<sup>33</sup> Tagore adds that when man's mind 'was illumined his awakened consciousness journeyed along widening avenues of life, crossing the frontiers of individual life into the universal life of humanity' (op. cit.: 212). The experience of 'I am He' – *so'ham* – has inspired religious geniuses like Ramananda who embraced the sweeper saint Raidas. Jesus Christ meant the same 'I am He' when he said 'I and the Father are one'; and Buddha preaching the message of immeasurable friendliness (*maitri*) towards the whole universe, did this in the spirit of 'I am He' (cf. op. cit.: 214). The idea is that 'man may reveal through immeasurable love the divine within himself' (op. cit.: 214). Thus '*so'ham* is the *mantram* of the united evolution of Man, not of one particular individual' (op. cit.: 216). The *mantra*, the magic spell and meditation text, of evolution of the individual towards Universal Man is *so'ham*, I am He. And the identification implied in it is only possible through a love that encompasses the whole of humanity. This love does not exclude anyone and is the absolute opposite of sectarian and communal hatred.

What binds individual man, the social world and the Universal Man (as God) all together is the immanence of the divine substance. Immanent transcendence is the thread that keeps the world together and gives meaning to human evolution. *Man* is written from this perspective, namely that the divine is all-encompassing and everywhere present in the universe. Tagore does not go so far as to state that the divine *is* the universe, or the universe *is* the divine. But for Tagore God is not a transcendent creator of the universe as in the Abrahamic religions. Tagore's God can only be fully appreciated as a Hindu concept, even bereft of Hindu mythological paraphernalia or the many Hindu Gods and Goddesses. Tagore, quite unlike his father, embraces Upanishadic monism, although qualified. Yet Tagore does not seem to care for the scholastic fine points of the medieval Hindu theological schools of the Vedanta, among others the schools headed by Shankara and Ramanuja. Tagore's monism, like in the Upanishads, is a poetic evocation, not a scholastically formulated sectarian soteriology. Tagore's divine immanence can at its best be expressed as poetic image. The immanent and personal God, the *Jivandevatā*, is a crystallisation through aesthetic creation – in numerous poems and songs – of the spiritual enlightenment that was Tagore's in Sudder Street. Immanence in Tagore's God not only means proximity to the individual being, it means availability and familiarity, the liberation from the past into an indefinite future of evolution. Tagore did not have to import much from Western Protestantism or Western modernity to set down his version of Hindu modernity. Tagore had moved away from the

quasi-Protestantism of his Brahmo past towards realising a fully modern humanistic but also fully modern Hindu self. Tagore passed away in 1941. The most able and universal voice of modern enlightenment Hinduism had entered the final silence.

## Notes

- 1 The Sadharan Brahmo Samaj hymnal is called *Brahmasaṅgīt* and is often reprinted by the Sadharan Brahmo Samaj publishing house. The other hymnal is called *Brahmasaṅgīt o Saṅkīrtan* and is published by the Bharatbarshiya Brahmamandir at Keshub Chandra Sen Street, Calcutta.
- 2 The recently published selections translated from Bengali into English try to fill up this lack: Sen (2014).
- 3 Many details about, and background information on, these and other works he wrote until 1889 are gathered together by Pulinbihari Sen (1973: 1–70), as well as by Svapna Majumdar (1987: 1–29).
- 4 See Chapter 4 and the references to Debendranath's Auto-biography: 59 corresponding to *Ātmajīvanī*: 84.
- 5 Unless otherwise indicated, all Rabindranath's prose and poetry that I am quoting in this chapter was originally written in Bengali. Rabindranath did not seriously write in English until 1912.
- 6 Op. cit. *Brāhma Dharmah*, Bengali, Brahmopasanā: 28, in main text I: 41–2, 77, pp. 34, 35–6, 62. The Upanishadic passages are originally in Sanskrit.
- 7 This section on the *Jīvandeavatā* is partly based on an earlier article of mine: 'Awakening of the Waterfall: The Wellsprings of Rabindranath Tagore's Religious Humanism' in: Enayetur Rahim and Henry Schwartz, eds. 1998. *Contributions to Bengal Studies: An Interdisciplinary and International Approach*. Dhaka: Pustaka, pp. 370–96.
- 8 The term *antaryāmī* goes back to Bṛhad-āraṇyaka Upaniṣad, adhyāya 3, brāhmaṇa 7, where it refers to a cosmic divine principle which regulates everything in the macrocosmos, i.e. the universe, and the microcosmos, i.e. the individual human being.
- 9 A vina is an ancient Indian string instrument. The strings have to be plucked. In his poems Rabindranath often uses the metaphor of the vina to indicate the human personality that awaits God to play it.
- 10 Cf. for example: Kripalani (1980: 171); or the dismissive criticism of the *Jīvandeavatā* concept by Edward Thompson (1991: 104–7). On the other hand, there is the study of Rabindranath's idea of God by Jose Chunkapura (2002). Chunkapura discusses the *Jīvandeavatā* only in connection with Rabindranath's late work: *The Religion of Man* from 1931, cf. Chunkapura (2002: 258ff). In *The Religion of Man* Rabindranath devotes a whole chapter to his spiritual evolution and in this context he gives an English paraphrase of the poem *Jīvandeavatā* (The English Writings, Vol. 3: 123).
- 11 All English translation of the Sanskrit texts are my own.
- 12 Debendranath did use text 7 of the Mandukya, but interpreted this passage in a purely theistical way, cf. *Brāhma Dharmah*, p. 62, which is text 77 of the first khanda. The very last phrase of passage 7 also appears as in the Brahmo liturgy as the last part of the Brahmo communion with God, the *samādhān*, referred to earlier.
- 13 Source of this quotation from a letter by Rabindranath, dated 25 September 1894: Prabhatkumar Mukhopadhyay, *Ravindrājīvanī*, pratham khaṇḍa, 4th ed. Vishvabharati, Calcutta 1392, Beng.era, p. 404.

- 14 Although it is pure speculation, one could think that Rabindranath is toying with the Goddess imagery of Bankim's *Vande Mātaram* poem and recasts this imagery in Upanishadic terms.
- 15 For details on the Hindu cult of the Mother Goddess, see Coburn (1988, 1992).
- 16 As is well known, the English *Gitanjali* published in 1912 contains Rabindranath's own poetical prose renderings of about 50 poems from the Bengali *Gitāñjali*, as well as about 30 from *Gitimālya* 'Wreath of Songs' (1912), about 15 from *Naivedya* 'Offerings' (1901) and a few from earlier volumes. The English *Gitanjali* had given Rabindranath at once world-wide fame, and the Nobel Prize for literature in 1913. For a full discussion of the English *Gitanjali* see Radice (2012).
- 17 The English collection of essays, called *Sadhana*, published in 1913 consists of reworkings of some early sermons, subsequently published in Bengali in the two volumes *Śāntiniketan*, 1909–16: Ravindra-Racanāvalī, vol. 7: 523–728; Ravindra-Racanāvalī, vol. 8: 545–686.
- 18 These are found in the collected songs of *Gitavitān*, sections *svadeś* (own country) and *jātiya saṅgīt* (national songs). Moreover, Rabindranath is the author of the national anthems of both India and Bangladesh.
- 19 Incidentally, one can see from both texts how Rabindranath often only paraphrased and condensed his Bengali poems when re-doing them in English.
- 20 Radice turned this Bengali sonnet into an excellent English sonnet (2012: 94–5).
- 21 Part of this section is a partial reworking of my paper 'Rabindranath's Vision of the Indian Nation: 1900–1917', presented at a three-day seminar on Rabindranath held at University of Toronto in November 2005. This seminar was organised by Profs. Joseph and Kathleen O'Connell.
- 22 Renan wrote this tract originally as a lecture, which he held at the Sorbonne in 1882.
- 23 Both articles can be found in: Ravindra-Racanāvalī, vol. 2: 619–25. On pp. 826–7 there are some bibliographical notes on these articles.
- 24 For a detailed enumeration and discussion of the Upanishad texts Rabindranath was familiar with along with the relevant passages he quotes in his work and where and how often, see Mazumdar (1972: 42–59, 464–518). In the same book Pampa Mazumdar has traced almost every Sanskrit text that Rabindranath quoted from in his numerous writings.
- 25 English paraphrases/summary translations of this essay occur in: *The Visva-Bharati Quarterly*, April 1924, pp. 1–14; Rabindranath Tagore. 1961. *Towards Universal Man*. London: Asia Publishing House, pp. 83–100, notes pp. 369–70.
- 26 In the Bengali original this chapter is numbered 76; in the English translation published by Macmillan India it is 79. Radha Chakravarty's new translation from Bengali retains the numbering of the Bengali original (Chakravarty 2009).
- 27 Caṇḍāls are of low impure caste and live outside the village, according to Manu 10.51–2; see Olivelle (2004: 183).
- 28 On *Ghare-Baire* see Nandy (1994); Datta (2005).
- 29 The volume *Hindu-Muslimān Samparka*, *Ravindraranān Saṅgraha*. Edited by Nityapriya Ghosh, Kolkata: Mrittika, 2003, gives a good selection of Rabindranath's views on the Hindu-Muslim relationships over the years.
- 30 I am tempted to use 'Tagore' to designate Rabindranath as when he began to publish in English. To call him 'Rabindranath' is a Bengali habit and would – for me at least – refer to the author of the Bengali books. William Radice is suggesting this division in the Preface to the 2005 edition of his *Rabindranath Tagore: Selected Poems*. London: Penguin Books, p. 7. Yet the two personae are inseparable, for Rabindranath published with the same zest in English after he received the Nobel Prize, as he wrote his mature Bengali works. Yet to distinguish



between the English and the Bengali Rabindranath it may be useful to call him both Rabindranath and Tagore.

31 See, on this point, van Bijlert (1989: 7–19, 31–4, 158–61).

32 Chapter 6 of *The Religion of Man*, ‘Vision’, in which Tagore briefly narrates his experience in Sudder Street.

33 The Sanskrit phrase *so’ham* means exactly ‘I am he’. It occurs in Isha Upanishad 16.

## Concluding remarks

With Rabindranath Tagore who advocated Upanishad-inspired individual flourishing, some kind of culmination (artistic, spiritual and social) had been reached of the Vedantic modernisation initiated by Rammohun. Two trends have been obvious: (1) the individualist Vedantic concept of self-realisation as the source of personal Hindu modernity; (2) the rudiments of collective self-realisation transforming into anti-colonial Indian nationalism. Rammohun was the first modern Hindu to promote the Upanishadic Vedanta as a Hindu version of Protestantism with emphasis on scripture. Due to Rammohun, Vedantic scriptures such as the Upanishads and the Bhagavad Gita came to be regarded as Hindu scriptures, that is, as scriptural sources of personal conviction and religious inspiration. They were meant to fill up the ideological inner space of individual Hindus who were looking for meaning in their personal lives, for a philosophy of Hindu modernity or modern Hinduism. To date the most talented, famous and secular proponent of this Upanishadic/Vedantic private Hindu modernity is Rabindranath Tagore.

What Rammohun had started in the Brahmo Samaj and bequeathed to his modernising Hindu successors like Debendranath, Keshub and to some extent Vivekananda and Arabindo/Sri Aurobindo was not the Protestant church model of collective self-realisation but the Hindu sect consisting of world-renouncers or at least of persons sympathetic to world-renunciation – if only in spirit and not in fact. In spite of its modernising intents, the collective aspect of the Hindu reformation had to conform to traditional Hindu religious idioms in order to gain sympathy among Hindus and to have a modicum of organisational success. The Protestant Western model did not work in a Hindu social context. The Brahmo Samaj never became a Hindu Protestant church with a large following. Instead it was and remained close to a Hindu sect run by charismatic gurus cum organisers and political saints. Such a guru was an authoritarian father figure: a special, almost superhuman being whose words were supposed to be obeyed implicitly. The idiom of the renouncing Hindu sect was adopted in the Ramakrishna Mission founded by Vivekananda. This mission was and still is run by the monks of the Ramakrishna Mission. The Mission does not resemble the Protestant congregational form.

Towards the beginning of the twentieth century, collective Hindu modernity in Bengal had crystallised around the model of a Hindu sect of militant world-renouncers who would start a nationalist revolution. The prototype of this type of organisation is found in Bankim's *Anandamath*. The *Anushilan Samitis* that carried out terrorist attacks against British civil servants were basically inspired by the military world-renouncers described in that novel. Within the lap of this military form of Hinduism were born both anti-colonial nationalism and Hindu chauvinism. The latter tendency came to the fore from the 1920s onwards and has since beset Indian politics with ominous Hindu radicalism. Rabindranath moved away from these collectivist nationalist tendencies unleashed by the Vedantic reformation. Instead, as a reaction to it, he stressed personal self-realisation and the development of a personal spirituality that drew on the Vedantic sources but was secular and looking forward to the future. The main thrust of Rabindranath's thinking in the last decades of his life was towards personal responsibility and listening to the voice of conscience. The period from Rammohun up to Rabindranath spans little over a century. The development of a Vedantic/ Upanishadic-inspired modern Hindu mentality or ethos was by no means the only event in the Hindu religious modernisation process, but it certainly has been immensely influential (as can be seen from Kenneth Jones's monograph, 1989). That the movements Rammohun, Debendranath, Keshub, Sri Aurobindo and Swami Vivekananda have founded still exist to this day is a clear indication of their importance for the advancement of a modern Hindu ethos (even if limited mostly to the urbanised educated upper-middle-class Hindus, in other words the sections of Hindu society with whom rests the strongest cultural hegemony).

A major Indian moral leader and freedom fighter, Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) squarely fits in this list. Although he was primarily a social and political activist, Gandhi always insisted he derived his moral values – as far as Hinduism was concerned – from the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi regarded the latter as his spiritual encyclopaedia.<sup>1</sup> He very much wanted to promote the study of the Bhagavad Gita among all Indians. In Gandhi's use of the Gita we can observe the blending of private individualistic Hindu spirituality (non-communal and humanistic like Tagore's) and the collective striving for political independence of India. Gandhi merged the personal Vedantic spirituality with the nationalistic use of the Gita (like Bankim and Sri Aurobindo did). Gandhi, like the other Vedantic reformers, stressed the textual aspect of Hinduism.<sup>2</sup> He reiterated the idea of the Vedantic reformers to the effect that Hinduism ought to be based on a scripture, i.e. the Bhagavad Gita. Gandhi's charisma as a political and moral figure of world stature also derives from his using the idiom of world-renunciation. He almost seems to incarnate the nationalist Hindu monks of Bankim's *Anandamath*, or the monks/renouncers addressed in Sri Aurobindo's *Bhawani Mandir*. Gandhi shared their ethos and intentions, but for one significant difference: he rejected violence as a method

to achieve his political goals. Actually, Gandhi is the only one to stress non-violence as the main message of the Bhagavad Gita. In this he was unique among all interpreters of the Gita that preceded him. Bankim saw in the Gita an argument for the legitimacy of using violence against an aggressor (in his case the British). So did Sri Aurobindo and the *Anushilan Samitis* (against the same enemy). Bal Gangadhar Tilak (1856–1920), the Marathi politician and nationalist activist and an elder contemporary of Gandhi and Sri Aurobindo, also promoted the Bhagavad Gita in connection with Indian independence. Both he and Sri Aurobindo (they knew each other personally and well) propagated the Bhagavad Gita as a gospel of militant collective Hindu emancipation. Both held that the Gita taught the legitimacy of violence against evil-doers.

In the process of nationalist propaganda large sections of the Indian educated urbanised classes began to regard the Bhagavad Gita as the Hindu scripture *par excellence*. This trend got a huge boost with the dissemination of cheap bilingual editions of the Gita in pocket format. The *Gita Press* was largely instrumental in bringing this trend about. Since 1926 this rather Hindu orthodox (and orthopractical) publishing house set itself the task of educating the Indian/Hindu reading public about Hindu scriptures and did this by means of cheap and easily available publications on Hinduism including translations of Sanskrit texts. One of the major goals of the *Gita Press* (which also still exists to this day and whose publications can be bought in every Indian railway station) is the production of small cheap bilingual editions of the Gita, small pocket bibles as it were. Since 1926 the *Gita Press* has sold millions of copies of its Gita translations in every major Indian language, as well as in many European languages.<sup>3</sup> The *Gita Press* was one of the publicity props of Hindu nationalism and the beginning of disseminating the Gita in 1926 falls within the critical period 1925–27. These years were decisive for Hindu political organisation and the scripturalisation of nationalist Hinduism.

Hindu nationalism of a harsh collectivist and exclusivist mould started to take organisational shape for the first time around 1909 with the establishment of what became the pan-Indian Hindu Mahasabha a decade later (cf. Zavos 2002: 120–1, 176–7). Next to the Hindu Mahasabha the Rashtriya Swayamsevak Sangh (RSS) was established in 1925 with a Hindu nationalist agenda and promoting the notion of *hindutva*, ‘Hindu-ness’ from the late 1920s onwards, through to the period after Indian Independence in 1947 (cf. Zavos op. cit.: 167–8, 180–97). Over the nine decades of its existence, the RSS has spawned many organisations which share the (exclusivist) Hindu nationalist agenda. These organisations all share the same family traits and are designated as the Sangh Parivar, ‘RSS Family’. Their view on Hinduism is in many ways the opposite of the Vedantic ideology discussed in the preceding chapters.<sup>4</sup> Since the demolition of the Babri Masjid in Ayodhya in 1992 by RSS-linked activists, the political wing of the RSS, the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP, ‘The Indian People’s Party’) has come to

dominate the Indian political scene. The influence of the RSS permeates much writing and propaganda of contemporary Hinduism.

As a result the actual voices of Rammohun, Tagore and Gandhi seem to have been almost silenced. The RSS and affiliates hail figures like Bankim, Vivekananda and Sri Aurobindo as the precursors of the RSS type of Hindu ideology and nationalism. And yet it is also clear that even these figures never called for unqualified majoritarian Hinduism, nor ever suggested that Indian religious minorities should conform to majoritarian Hinduism/collectivist Hindu nationalism. None of the Hindu thinkers that were discussed in the previous chapters ever expressed in their writings hatred of Muslims or Christians. These thinkers are not known for rejecting Islam or Christianity as not belonging to Indian culture. Even Bankim – who perhaps comes closest to Hindu nationalism in the present-day majoritarian sense – did not call for the removal of Muslims from Indian soil. Not that Hindu-Muslim relations in the nineteenth century were always peaceful. Polarisation between Hindus and Muslims and communal violence did occur in the nineteenth century and these outbreaks of violence were not sporadic.<sup>5</sup> But it was early twentieth-century national organisation of Hindu nationalism (Hindu chauvinism) through the Hindu Mahasabha and especially the RSS that gave a strong boost to violence against Muslims, Christians and people of low caste. The partition of British India in 1947 was largely the outcome of the vehement antagonism between Hindus and Muslims. In pre-Independence India, Muslims made up 35 % of the Indian population. All of this was never foreshadowed in the writings of the Vedantic reformers we have discussed. One could speculate that only Tagore saw this Hindu communal storm approaching, as did Gandhi. Tagore died before Independence, Gandhi was gunned down some months after Independence by a Hindu communalist with undeniable ties to the RSS (see Guha 2018: 896–900).

These developments in the recent past and the present raise some pertinent questions regarding the position and the future of Vedantic modernity both in India and in a global context. The latter is relevant in view of the fact that Hindus have spread out in a global diaspora at least since the nineteenth century (even though numerically they make up perhaps 1 % of the size of the Indian Hindu population).<sup>6</sup> Thus Hinduism is found all over the globe. Much of this Hinduism seems to be culturally linked to, or show affinity with, the Sangh Parivar. Does the Vedantic modernity that first began in Bengal in the early nineteenth century have any influence today? How does it still help promote modern values like individual choice, personal autonomy, liberty, human rights, citizen's constitutional rights, gender equality, the right to flourish and develop one's abilities and personality in freedom? Are big issues like racial, gender and caste discrimination addressed? What about social and political justice? In what ways can Vedantic modernity tackle religious intolerance and obscurantism, anti-minority violence, domestic violence (against women and children); how does it combat chauvinism and jingoism? Many of these issues could be

regarded as purely political, but still there are normative aspects to these matters that do belong to the domain of religion. After all, much of what we have discussed in the preceding chapters was emphatically a mixture of personal religion and collective social and political concerns. The relevance of the Vedantic modernity was precisely this: it aimed at social and political change and sought to enlighten the individual person situated in society. Looking at the period from the latter half of the twentieth century until the present, one does not see much Vedantic modernity, but rather a violent homogenising Hindu collectivism with ominous elitist and exclusivist tendencies. It looks as if the Sangh Parivar is a large and global force dominating modern Hinduism. It could be argued that the Sangh Parivar is nothing but one of the logical outcomes of the collectivist tendency of nineteenth-century Vedantism. The irony is that Rammohun initiated this with a view to promote modern values like individual autonomy, liberty and equality.

Is the Vedantic reformation dead? That it is not widely noticeable or seems to have lost appeal, does not mean that it is totally extinct. Astonishingly enough, the writings of the academic Hindu theologian Anantanand Rambachan read like a revival of reformist Vedanta. In his writings Rambachan is trying to advocate the Vedanta tradition of Advaita, non-duality. He interprets the Upanishads, the Brahma Sutra and the Bhagavad Gita from an advaita perspective based on the commentaries of Shankara. In *The Advaita Worldview* (2006) Rambachan summarises his advaita-theological take on human suffering, discipleship, the real Self, Brahman, the cosmos, and the idea of liberation (*moksha*). Liberation he interprets among others as identification of one's own self with the self of all living beings (Rambachan 2006: 109–11). Regarding social issues of Hinduism, Rambachan asserts that the caste system should not bar anyone from taking note of the emancipatory message of Vedanta; in fact Vedanta should 'challenge the social and religious iniquities of caste and gender' (op. cit.: 29). Furthermore, the Advaita Vedanta

must not ignore the suffering of human beings when they lack opportunities to attain the necessities for decent living such as food, housing, clean water, health care, and literacy or when suffering is inflicted through injustice and oppression based on gender, caste, or race.

(op. cit.: 110)

In a later work, Rambachan expands on these themes of social justice. His book *A Hindu Theology of Liberation* (2015) applies the insights and spiritual realisations of Advaita Vedanta to social and religious criticism of: patriarchy, homophobia, child abuse, and the iniquities of caste and the oppression of Dalits. Based on the fundamental equality of all human beings – because they all embody the 'celebrative expression' of the same Brahman – Rambachan demonstrates how Vedanta should motivate its followers to combat in a non-violent way all forms of inequality and

discrimination. It is noteworthy that Rambachan – although writing like a radical Hindu reformer – is a follower of the world-renouncer/Hindu monk, Swami Dayananda Saraswati (1930–2015) to whom he dedicates this work. Ironically or significantly, this Swami was also the spiritual teacher of the Indian prime minister, Narendra Modi (BJP and close to the Sangh Parivar as a whole). We may perhaps not expect much Vedantic progressive liberal modernity from governments. Yet we could state in the words of Sagarika Ghose, journalist and liberal critic of Hindutva politics that ‘Hinduism has always been about belief in individual pursuit of moksha [liberation]: the seeker meditates alone and finds his own way . . . every path to god was seen as valid, Hinduism respects all’ (Ghose 2018: 92). Moreover, ‘Voluntary choice is the basis of a liberal and free society and voluntary individual choice is the basis of Hinduism’ (op. cit.: 95). Such observations may yet point to a bright future.

## Notes

- 1 Cf. Guha (2018: 264–7). Gandhi’s amanuensis Mahadev Desai published an edition of the Bhagavad Gita with Gandhi’s interpretation of the texts and his comments. These Gandhi had prepared when at his ashram Sabarmati he devoted almost the whole of 1926 to a thorough study and explanation of the Gita (cf. Strohmeier 2009).
- 2 Cf. Guha (2018: 276, 354); Strohmeier (2009: XVI–XVII).
- 3 For details see the very informative history of the *Gita Press* covering all its political, religious, cultural activities and even scandals: Mukul (2017). For details on the start in 1926 of the cheap Gita editions, see Mukul (op. cit.: 103 ff).
- 4 To date the most comprehensive history of the development of the RSS from its inception in 1925 till the early 1990s remains Jaffrelot (1996).
- 5 Cf. the very useful analysis of nineteenth-century local Hindu-Muslim communal violence and its metamorphosis into twentieth-century Hindu communalism to a pan-Indian scale: Pandey (1992).
- 6 The number of non-Indian converts to Vedantic Hinduism seems very small. The fact that the practice of yoga in the Western world is becoming very popular may not be construed as indicating massive conversion to Hinduism. Many of these practitioners of yoga do not call themselves converts to Hinduism.

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